

# CHELSEA REVIEW

OUTLOOK ON ART: IV

AN INTERVIEW WITH KIMON FRIAR

NEW CHELSEA NOVEL

(COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE)

THE CAT

BY RAJA RAO

POETRY

GEORGE ECONOMOU . SEYMOUR FAUST .

ISABELLA FEY . JACK HIRSCHMAN .

ROBERT KELLY . JEROME ROTHENBERG .

Summer

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# CHELSEA REVIEW

Number Five

Summer 1959

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## OUTLOOK ON ART IV

### AN INTERVIEW WITH KIMON FRIAR

KIMON FRIAR, who has recently translated *The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel* by Nikos Kazantzakis, is an American poet, scholar and teacher. Of Greek descent, Mr. Friar has translated many of the works of important contemporary Greek poets. As well as translating Greek poetry into English, he has also been active in American poetry and theatre. He was director of the Y.M. and Y.W.H.A. Poetry Center in New York from 1943 to 1947, and in 1951-52 he produced special programs at New York's Circle-in-the-Square Theater. Among his many publications of translations, poetry and essays is the anthology, *Modern Poetry: American and British*, which he edited with John Malcolm Brinnin.

Shortly after the publication of his translation of *The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel*, Mr. Friar visited the New York apartment of one of the editors of *The Chelsea Review*, where, after dinner, the following interview took place.

#### INTERVIEWERS

You have translated an epic poem of 33,333 lines into verse. How do you feel now that it is finished?

#### FRIAR

It was a work of love. It had to be a work of love for a man to give up his teaching position and faculty seniority for a translation. I knew that I could continue teaching and do the translation in about ten years, but I wished to complete it sooner because Kazantzakis was suffering from leukemia and had few years to live. So I did it in four and a half years, and when I finished I completely collapsed.

#### INTERVIEWERS

And where was that?

## PRIAR

I was in Rio when I finished and what better place could there be to collapse than the Copacabana? I lay on the beach in the bright sun looking at Sugar Loaf and telling myself, "You've got to climb it, you know. Who comes to Rio and doesn't climb Sugar Loaf?"

## INTERVIEWERS

Did you have any problems with the translation?

## PRIAR

I felt that the translation had to be exact in every detail. Kazantzakis was impatient with details. He was concerned with the sweep and the scope of his poem. In fact, there were a few errors in detail in the first edition. The poem would speak of the seven waves of worms that ate a corpse, and the reader would find only six. I pointed these out to Kazantzakis and he made the corrections in the second Greek edition, although he was not troubled by this kind of thing. But I am a perfectionist. A vast number of lines begin with *kai*, the Greek word for "and," but this word can be elided with following words in Greek, something impossible in English. So I used every kind of conjunction I could: *but*, *since*, *because*, *although*, *for* and so forth in order to avoid this constant repetition and simple sentence structure. Kazantzakis was very fond of the word *breast*, which he used to describe many animate and inanimate things in the poem. In the Greek original, there is even a flea with a breast. To speak continuously and rapturously of breasts in English is a delicate matter, so I lopped them off right and left, substituting anything that would fit: *thighs*, *stomach*, *belly*, *head*, etc.

## INTERVIEWERS

Do you think you changed the poem in any way?

FRIAR

Despite the minor changes, all of which were approved by Kazantzakis, I did not alter the poem.

INTERVIEWERS

Were you ever tempted to do so?

FRIAR

I wrote with complete confidence in myself, upheld by the faith that was given me by Kazantzakis. I believed that I could write a good English poem and yet be true to the letter as well as to the spirit of the original. I made some minor stylistic changes which one day I will enumerate for the record.

INTERVIEWERS

When did you start translating the *Odyssey*?

FRIAR

I first translated in prose only those sections illustrated by Ghika, the contemporary Greek artist, who first introduced me to the poem. That was about eight years ago.

INTERVIEWERS

Did you know Kazantzakis at that time?

FRIAR

No, I had never met Kazantzakis. However, I met him shortly thereafter in Florence. He was greatly impressed by the similarities in our attitudes toward literature, politics, philosophy, life, everything. For example, my favorite painting is Grunewald's *Crucifixion* and later, when I first walked into Kazantzakis' studio in Antibes, I saw a copy of the same painting hanging over his desk. He wrote me in 1955, "There is no such thing as Chance, there is only Destiny; for it was writ-

ten that you should have discovered in your youth what I have discovered only after much struggle, and that we should be agreed on the greatest and deepest problems of man, his fate, and of art." Our meeting in Florence was ultimately responsible for my translating the poem. He wrote me, later, "That night in a Florentine garden has remained a sacred way-station in my life." When Max Schuster, who had published Kazantzakis novels, *Zorba the Greek* and *The Greek Passion* in English, asked Kazantzakis who should translate the *Odyssey*, Nikos answered, "There is only one man on earth who can do it, Kimon Friar."

## INTERVIEWERS

An epic certainly doesn't have as much selling appeal as a novel. Why did Schuster decide to publish the *Odyssey*?

## FRIAR

All that Schuster, who does not know Greek, knew of the *Odyssey* at that point were the passages read aloud to him and his wife, Ray, by Kazantzakis when they were visiting the poet. They were both so moved, Schuster knew he had to publish the *Odyssey*, regardless of cost or possibility of profit or loss.

## INTERVIEWERS

How did you first start the translation?

## FRIAR

I began my task by translating 300 lines of the Greek into prose and then into verse. I sent copies of both versions to T. S. Eliot, Archibald MacLeish, C. M. Bowra, Arthur Miller, Gore Vidal, Karl Shapiro, Ronald Freeland, James Merrill and others, almost all of whom encouraged me to attempt a translation in verse. I then sent both versions to Simon and Schuster in New York. The editorial staff advised, "prose." Max Schuster said, "If Friar and his friends say verse, verse it is!" Nevertheless, to be entirely certain, I translated all of

Book VI both in prose and in verse. I then started my translation of the entire poem, using the iambic hexameter, which I chose after much experimentation. At first, I wrote ten lines a day, and then fifty. For a while I wrote them out in long hand, but soon I started thinking in iambic hexameters and worked directly at the typewriter, revising by long hand many times, and then retyping.

## INTERVIEWERS

A critic, in reviewing the poem and your translation, spoke of your "loose hexameters." Do you think this is an accurate description?

## FRIAR

They are *not* loose hexameters. They are anything but loose, for they are carefully organized with six beats and six feet to a line. Of course, they have their normal inversions or anapestic substitutions. I explain this prosody carefully in an Appendix. English meter is not well understood, even by Professors of English.

## INTERVIEWERS

The *Odyssey* has been called a classic. Do you think this will discourage readers?

## FRIAR

It is great enough to withstand even admiration.

## INTERVIEWERS

When the *Odyssey* was first published in Greece was it received in a similar way?

## FRIAR

No, not at all. In fact, it provoked quite the opposite reaction. Although Kazantzakis had staunch supporters in Greece, the majority of the intellectuals both resented and rejected the work because of the great number of words it con-

tained gathered from various Greek dialects; many of these words were completely unknown to most educated readers. They objected to the use of demotic spelling, vocabulary and syntax as well as to the abandonment of the traditional marks of accentuation.

#### INTERVIEWERS

Do you yourself have any objection to these innovations?

#### FRIAR

Not at all; in fact, the only criticisms I do have are related to the transition from Homer's *Odyssey* to the modern one. First of all, I think that Penelope is ignored too much by Kazantzakis' *Odysseus*. Here is a man who has been away from his home and wife for almost twenty years. One would think that he would accept or reject her with as much care as he finally rejects Ithaca. I think at least a scene of rejection is necessary. I also think that the abandonment of the traditional Greek gods in favor of the search for the one God is too abrupt; *Odysseus* should have bid a special farewell to Athena who has guided him so well throughout. You know, when I mentioned these criticisms to Kazantzakis, he begged me to write in whatever scenes I thought necessary. He had complete belief in our ultimate identity, in our thoughts, and gave me more freedom than I cared to take.

#### INTERVIEWERS

Do you feel that Kazantzakis is in the mainstream of contemporary Greek literature, or does he, like the poet Cavafy, stand somewhat apart from the general tradition.

#### FRIAR

As a matter of fact, he stands quite apart. When I was in Greece ten years ago, I asked everyone I met about the writers and poets of Greece; I wanted to get to know their work. No one ever mentioned Kazantzakis. Though he worked with classical myths used by the more academic writers, he based them on living Greek folklore, traditions and symbolism. Articles were often written against him and his work. At one point, he incurred the wrath of the Greek Church because of

his novels *The Greek Passion* (Greek title: *Christ Recrucified*) and *The Last Temptation*. The Church might have succeeded in excommunicating him but for the intervention of the Patriarch himself.

## INTERVIEWERS

Is Kazantzakis still unpopular in Greece?

## FRIAR

He always had a substantial following, but like many writers of small countries (I think of Joyce) Kazantzakis went through the pattern of rejection by his countrymen, recognition by the rest of the world, and then his own countrymen hurrying to embrace him as their own:

Seven wealthy towns contend for Homer dead,  
Through which the living Homer begged his bread\*

## INTERVIEWERS

You must have worked very closely with Kazantzakis?

## FRIAR

Kazantzakis told me many times that if he had had a son, I would have been that son. I know that for me, he was my spiritual father. We were both poets, and both Greeks who were born in parts of Greece still occupied by Turkey.

## INTERVIEWERS

There must have been a certain amount of tension, perhaps even envy in your relationship.

\*Editors' note: there is an essay in the December 1, 1958 issue of the Greek literary periodical, *Nea Estia*, which describes the great enthusiasm with which Athenians attended a memorial for Kazantzakis on the first anniversary of his death.

## PRIAR

There was only the outright and clean envy I felt for his great accomplishments. Just as our relationship was that of father and son, any resentment I may have had was channeled into the work. The greatest goad for my completing the translation was my desire to surpass the father. And this was as he wished it. I told him that ultimately, like Judas, I would betray him, and he agreed.

## INTERVIEWERS

Did you work on the translation with Kazantzakis for any length of time?

## PRIAR

We met a number of times, and first read the entire poem together, word for word, during four months of summer in 1954, in Antibes and the French Alps. I sent him immediately from Greece every newly translated book. In the midst of my translation, we spent a month in the Yugoslavian Alps. Kazantzakis' wife wanted to go to Greece to be present at the filming on location of *The Greek Passion* (called "He Who Must Die" in the film version) and he would let her go only if I came to stay with him in Yugoslavia.

## INTERVIEWERS

Why didn't Kazantzakis himself go to Greece?

## PRIAR

Kazantzakis had no need to return to Greece. He didn't want to become involved in publicity, attacks, adulation and so forth. But more than that, he did not have to go back, he did not have to touch the real rock or sea, for he carried Greece alive in his heart.

## INTERVIEWERS

Could you tell us something about that month in Yugoslavia and how you worked together?



## FRIAR

We had adjoining rooms in the hotel and we would shout back and forth all morning as we worked. In the afternoon, we would walk around the mountains and along the lake and discuss the day's work and tell each other of our thoughts and our lives. I must one day write a memoir of our conversations.

One time only, we had a difference of opinion. This was in the French Alps. I have forgotten what the issue was, but I made some statement and Kazantzakis suddenly said he refused to discuss it any further. I went back to the hotel, and later that day he came to me and apologized, the father apologizing to the son. It takes a great man to do that. Every time we parted, he would say, *théos mazi sou*, God be with you. I knew that Kazantzakis certainly did not believe in God as the word is used in such phrases. Yet he used it in speech and in his writing. I said to him, "Nikos, why do you say that when you really don't believe it?" He answered, "It is saturated, it is wounded with human history." But after that, whenever I left him, he would always say, *Zorba be with you, Odysseus be with you*.

## INTERVIEWERS

Do you intend to translate any more of Kazantzakis' works?

## FRIAR

Kazantzakis made me promise him that after I completed the *Odyssey* I would not translate any more of his works; he wanted me to devote the rest of my life to my own writing. However, I have already translated his *Saviors of God: Spiritual Exercises*, which will soon be published by Simon and Schuster. They also want to publish a deluxe boxed edition of the Kazantzakis *Odyssey* and Homer's *Odyssey*.

## INTERVIEWERS

Which translation of the Homer will they use?

## PRIAR

They want me to prepare a new translation in the same iambic hexameter I used for the Kazantzakis epic. I must do this while my thoughts still run in this measure. I will, of course, work from the ancient text, but I will also refer to the translation into modern Greek by Kazantzakis and Professor Kakrides, a classical scholar who lost his position at the University of Athens because he advocated the eradication of accental marks in modern Greek spelling. However, he is now an honored scholar at the University of Salonika.

## INTERVIEWERS

You mentioned your own writing. What are your plans in that direction?

## PRIAR

First, there is a novel that takes place in Greece. I have it planned down to the last detail. All I have to do is sit down at a typewriter and let it pour out. I am working on a series of poems which I would like to call *The Stone Eyes of Medusa* and a book of essays related to those poems. In these poems I attempt to reconcile two contraries, extreme realism and unrealistic symbolism, in order to achieve an illusion of harmony. But I am a dualist in that I believe that this attempt cannot succeed. The beauty and the tension of life lies in this unresolved duality that approximates an illusionary synthesis.



OMMISSION: In Issue No. 4, the original French version of the poem EPITAPHE by Jules Laforgue should have been mentioned as: COPYRIGHT BY SAMUEL LOVEMAN.

## SEYMOUR FAUST

Mr. Faust's first volume of verse, *The Lovely Quarry*, was published last year by the Hawk's Well Press.

### POLAR FAUNA

In terrain, musk ox  
short at the shoulder,  
graze where glacial boulder  
hides blue fox

shares this double nomenclature.  
Though secondary to be sure  
it is singular  
and pure in nature.

and snow owl ghosts.  
The polar bear,  
for isolation there  
on the cold's coasts,

A sheep-like-antelope,  
the saiga, may take  
its name from no namesake  
but needs a trope.

### WINTER POEM OF THE CHEERFUL MEMORY

Since the white hills  
are marred with shrubbery  
and over burnt hills  
the live roots of the shrubbery  
in rock, will bring it back  
I expect again the green environment

on them, and in their valley.  
We pitched the tents on grass  
that swept across the valley,  
the sides up. In grass  
dew wet I woke  
and so invoke the green environment.

## STARS AND THE FEELINGS

Inland, from the barrens  
and the sound of surf  
I took my way and thread  
a chain of lakes,

a land marked by cinders  
and cinder cones  
on its continental shelf  
and main land.

'Write about the stars  
of polar light'  
was one idea, and another  
'Look inside

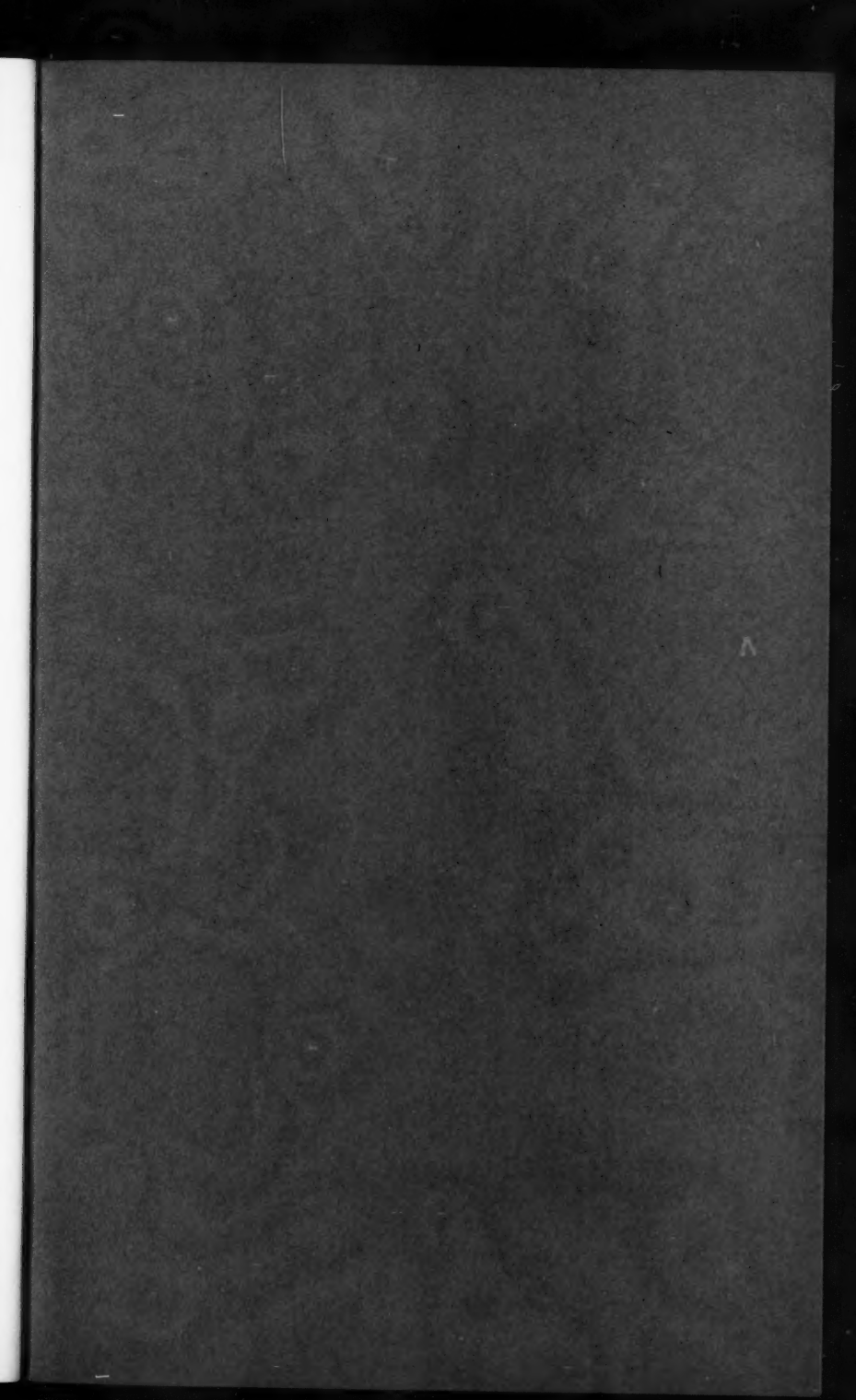
and make a metaphor,'  
as if to say  
'Look In Your Heart And Write'.  
In consequence

I turned my eyes on the spaces  
of the Two Directions  
and saw the cloud in each  
on Corcovado

passing by the peak,  
yet stationary,  
and if not increasing  
not diminished.

## DARWIN, CLIMBING A HILL

He thought a small tern  
staying just off his starboard ear,  
a black stripe on its eye,  
had a bright ghost inside and liked the idea.





**NEW**

***CHELSEA NOVEL***

**THE**

**C A T**

**BY**

**RAJA RAO**

## An Introduction to RAJA RAO

I know very little about the facts that constitute the biography of my good friend, Raja Rao. This may sound contradictory. But Raja Rao establishes a human intimacy with those he knows which is not based on an exchange of personal references as much as on an intensification of that pure sense of being which is common to all. He discusses the frankly abstract, broad, lofty in intimate detail. I first met him in Paris late in April. The climate was still damp and gray but fresh with anticipation. I saw him again in India, in the very vicinity in which this book is set (and the physical and human climate was just as he describes it here), but on each occasion the specific nature of what surrounded us served only as a springboard to the greater aspects which the surrounding scenes implied. These are the realms about which he is fiercely passionate; the greatness in what is great, and the greatness in each small thing; the love that shines forth from the Single Soul, and the love that permeates all; the pain of the individual aware of the human potential and — dedicated to achieve the highest — struggling to overcome the limiting sides in himself. These, he says, are the conflicts he had first to face, else he would not do honor to his role as a writer. A direct contact with the truest aspects in the soul had first to be made, else he would not fulfil his duty as man. To find a way and to carry out such inner demands, caused him to virtually stop his literary career which began so brilliantly with *Kantapura*, a novel, and *The Cow Of The Barricades*, a collection of stories, both written in English and both published in England and elsewhere. He resumed his work as novelist a few years ago. His new book, *The Serpent and The Rope*, published by Kalman-Levy in Paris; John Murray in London, will make its mark as one of the significant expressions in our time. His new stories have appeared in *Botteghe Oscure*, *Encounter*, *The Atlantic*, *Chelsea Review*, etc., and he has finished some new novels, some written in his native Kanarese, others in English.



*The Cat* is a recent work, set in the town in South India which has become his home.

Raja Rao was born a high caste Brahmin. I do not know just where in India he was born, but since the locale of this book is his true home, it is safe to say that he was, in fact, born there. For it was there where he was able to reestablish all that was traditional in his own past—there where he found the living expression, the realization of the local, the universal, the spiritual aspects in himself.

*Arthur Gregor.*

## THE CAT

I HAVE a small white house here, with a courtyard. From the back I look over cocoanut trees, and huts, and somewhere there's the sound of the sea.

I was appointed a divisional clerk here, some two years ago. I had left my wife and two children at Pattanur. My eldest was five years then and my youngest three. It's not so easy to change school, you know, and then it was monsoon time. When I thought of the new bad road (which leads to Kamla Bhavan, and after which my fat landlord had named this blue and ochre-banded building) I suffered to think of Usha coming back from school in this mess. Usha has sensitive hands, and her schoolmistress Tangamma was always telling her: Child, you have the fingers to make a nice braid. You will be a dutiful wife. —My wife Saroya, says: Nice thing for teachers to be talking of wives already.— But that is the way with my wife. She cannot help all the time talking of the wife. I am a quiet man, and to speak the truth, I don't yet know what it is to mean a husband. Yes, I had at last a house, it was new and it was white. It had ochre bands on it—almost as on a temple—and I could hear the sea.

Now that the monsoon had set in, there was such a problem about the school—and going to the office. I ate every day at the Home-Links, the food was so bad, but the freedom was so good. When I did not eat at the Home-Links, I could always go to Trivandrum Brahmin's Hotel. There the food smells less bad but the place looks more untidy. Life is always this choice—to choose an old house and nearer the office or the new one, and sitting amidst cocoanut gardens. My wife saw this and said: Oh, it's just like home, cocoanut trees, huts and the sound of the sea.— (For she is from Alwaye. And she never tired of saying how her old grandfather always told her of how once the Dutch landed some two hundred years ago, and thank heavens the Kartikura House was two miles away—but you could hear the sea), and the Dutch took away all the able-bodied men to fight (or to become Christians) and the Kartikura House being two miles away, it was left in peace. So the two miles and the cocoanut trees saved the Kartikura people, and thus emerged my wife, and from her and me, Usha, and Vithal (my last born, a boy as you well see, and so round and fresh, with a tilak on his brow, and he leaps when he sees a car, and says: Take me on a pom-pom,—but I make him ride my knee), but here, in Trivandrum, I sit alone and ride my own knee as it were. I like being alone. I like eating dosé and drinking coffee at Jyothibhavan. "Hey, take this away, this is such bad coffee," you can always say to the brahmin boy, but you cannot say that to Saroja. She will talk of the Dutch and christianity—and the sea.

The Dutch of course are an able-bodied people who have white ships. I have seen them because I have been to Bombay. During the war I tried to get into the navy and have better pay. At the interview they made me sit and leap so much, I cried Ay ya yo yo, and said: No more pay than this hand can earn with a nib. —A man is meant to work for his wife, to feed her, and for the children to go to school (I so much liked Usha coming back along the railway embankment from school — three miles are three miles from Pattanur to Alwaye, but then there's the signal, the red and green lights and all the other children, and father at home. Vithal was of course always in his mother's arms).

I was thirty-three, and I had always wondered that one is

alive. I wanted to become a rich man, for my wife would be so happy that I could do what I liked. If my plans went well and in the new India plans were never so difficult, the new is made with plans—and I would build a big house, like contractor Srinivasa Pai. He is some distant cousin of mine, and I no more like his house than I like his face. But people always introduce me in the office and say: This is Mr. Vishwanatha Pai cousin of Srinivasa Pai of Chalai Bazaar, as if I belonged to some royal lineage. My lineage smells of chilli and cardamom and tamarind like my wife's does of cocoanuts. But then my wife's people had two or three boats that plied the canals, and banditry and pilfering can make a lot of difference with prices. One can build a Kartikura house on threats. My wife was the second child, the first daughter was amply given away to a merchant in Ernakulam. Sundari (my wife's sister) must tell Ramu her husband about the Dutch and the sea. Ernakulam must have many ruins and the Dutch must have left a few guns there. In Kartikura house they still show you Dutch cannon balls. When you plough for the tapioca sowings, the cannon balls come out just like the tapioca. Usha used to say, the cannon is hard tapioca but this tapioca is man's. Thus the cannon became the God's. Strange how we transform all things into ours. Our houses must look like us, like our ancestors built temples in the shape of man. In Chilamabaram temple, Shankar Iyer says, the image of Shiva occupies the place of the heart. Then what is the place Parvathi<sup>1)</sup> occupies? I sometimes wonder whether I have a heart like I wonder in summer whether the rains will ever come. In heat I strike. I struck my wife, only twice and I have left marks on her face.

\* \* \*

I don't know if you've heard of a bilva-tree—it has three leaves and a crust of thick thorns. It's a stumpy tree but dear to Shiva, for one day a hunter trying to hide himself shooting at his game—was it a deer or a porcupine—went up this obnoxious stump, and in his hours of waiting, set down

1) Wife unto Shiva and daughter of Himalay.

one leaf after the other, so they say, and a Shiva image being beneath, Shiva himself came in vision and said: Here I am.—For it's not the way you worship that is important but what you adore. Even an accidental fall of leaves on Shiva's head, got the wicked hunter his vision. And thus the stump of tree became sacred—and its trefoil sacred for all that is sacred to God.

So, when I look from my window eastward, just by the garden wall, I see this stump of bilva-tree thorns visible in the morning sun. And I wondered if God will ever bless me, just like that. Vithal must go to school next year. Usha would have to be brought to Trivandrum and sent to the convent. The sisters there, you know, are Belgian they say, and very good. They teach excellent English (and never forget they also teach Malayalam). But then for a Sarasawath-brahmin<sup>2</sup>) like me, Malayalam or English is the same to one. The Revenue Board has no preference. If preferences lie they lie in the direction of English. But soon it will be Hindi, and my Konkani will be of help. God helps one in everything. Will I build a big house, that is what I asked looking at the tree.

Just at that moment Govindan Nair looks up from between the leaves and says: Hey there, be you at home?—That is his style, if one may say so, of talking. It's a mixture of *The Vicar of Wakefield* and Shakespeare. The words are choice, the choice of the situation clumsy. He never says come and go. He will always say: Gentleman, may I invite myself there? Will I be permitted into your presence.—That's always the way with him and in English. He must twist a thing into its essence and spread it out. So that milk becomes cows' precious liquid or water the aqua of Ganges. His heart is so big, it builds a wall lest it run away with everything. He always wants to run away with everything. In fact he himself is running.

I have hardly formulated this in my slow mind—for as you can see, I am just like that hunter carelessly dropping bilva leaves on some Shiva as yet unknown—when this big

<sup>2</sup>) Brahmins who fled, so it is believed, from persecution in Kashmir in the early year of muslims conquest. They are in Travancor mostly engaged in business. Their language is called Konkani akin to Hindi.

creature Govindan Nair leaps from across the wall. That he is round and tall makes no difference to his movements. The fact is: to him all the world is just what he does. He does and so the world comes into being. He himself calls it: The kitten is being carried by the cat. We are all kittens carried by the cat. Some, who are lucky (like your hunter) will one day know it. Others live saying meow—meow. I like being kitten. And how about you, sir?—he would say, spread his fat legs on my bench, open his paws, produce some betel leaf or tobacco (or a cheap cigarette, if that could be found, but this almost never before me, for he knows I hate lit tobacco) and with munch and massaging his limbs, he sits to talk. “I tell you Ramakrishna Pai, there’s nothing like becoming rich. Our wives adore us if we can produce a car were it a toy car for the baby. Females have one virtue. They adore gilt. My wife is from a grand family. But I am a poor clerk like you. Of course I did brilliant things when I was young—I was handsome and all that, girls used to tell me, (so I rode a B.S.A. bicycle. I wore grey flannels and went to the College Tennis Club). For I do know of girls. Then some big man thought I was going to be a big man. And thus the wife came into existence. And two children to boot. But the great man became big in fat, and his clerkship remained at forty-five rupees. Fortunately there are wars. And rationing is one of the grandest inventions of man. You stamp paper with figures, and you feed stomachs on numbers. I was such, I am such, an original figure. You know there are sadhus, so they say, for I am ignorant of such things, who are supposed to eat three pinchfuls of sand one day, and the *mantra*<sup>3)</sup> does the rest. For three months they need no food. I am such a sadhu, dispensing numbers. I give magical cards, and my wife eats pearl rice. My children go to school. My father-in-law lives on his estates and says: Hey clerk, what about my daughter?— I laugh. A clerk is a clerk. He could at best rise to the post of superintendent, and have two peons at his door. Isn’t that so, dear sir. Ah, the kitten when its neck is held by its mother, does it know anything else but the joy of being held by the mother. You see the elongated thin hairy thing dangling, and

3) The recitation of sacred syllables.

you think, poor kid it must suffer to be so held. But I say the kitten is the safest thing in the world, the kitten held in the mouth of the mothercat. Could one have been born without a mother. Modern inventions do not so much need a father. But a mother. I tell you, without Mother the world is not. So, allow her to fondle you and to hold you. I often think, how wonderful it is to see the world, the legs dangling down, the eyes steady, and the mouth of the mother at the neck. Wonderful. Then Govindan Nair would go off on a quiet silence munching his betel leaves. — You are an innocent. I tell you God will build you a house of three storeys—note please, I say three storeys—here, just where you sit. Let the mothercat hold you by the neck. Suppose I were, for a moment to show you the mothercat!—Govindan Nair never says anything indifferent. For him all gestures, all words have meaning.—I meow-meow the dictionary, but my meaning is always one, he used to assure me.

“And so?”

“And so, sir, let us build a house of three storeys here. I am in the rationing department — and you in the Revenue Board. Figures, magical figures in war time. And you build a house, and like in some hospitals where it is writ, Vithaldass Ward, Maruthy Aiyer Ward I will have a Govindan Nair Ward, my name will thus be writ once in marble. Ah, the mothercat, does one know where she takes us.”

“Which is to say?” I venture.

“Which is to say, your three storeys will go high. Your leaves will have fallen on Shiva. The hunter has to feed his children, the divisional clerk will have to build a house for his august wife. Understood, sir? This is our secret understanding,” said Govindan Nair, went out to spit, and cried back from the veranda: I say it’s time for my office—and jumped across the wall and was gone. What a mysterious wall it is—it rises steadily just a little across my window, and has moss on it. The bilya leaves fall on it. And sometimes as if to remind us what a serious tree it is, a fruit falls on the cowshed on the other side of the wall, and the thud makes even the cattle rise. The cattle see me, and the smell of dung and urine of kine is sweet to me. Purity is so near, so concrete. Let us build the house.—Lord, let me build the house.

Govindan Nair is a terrible man. Huge in his sinews and important in his thought, devious though it is which will take you, like some tribes people do that lead you through jungle and briar, beside the bones of hyena and of panther, and through some smell of the elephant, and up again through narrow pathways that shows you of a sudden his Lord the Tiger might have passed by just now, just a moment ago here, and you hear the tiger call while some grass is scratching you by your feet, and once up the ledge, standing under a tree, the tribesman will say: "There, look, that's the Pandya Waterfall, Mother Bhavani's secret trysting place with Lord Shiva," and you shudder at the beauty and the silence—such are Govindan Nair's twists of passage and thought which take you through unknown twists and trysts and imponderables, to some majesty—meanwhile he says his mantra (even while he talks) and you hold your breath. Look, look, there Shiva comes down three days before full moon and in *marghashira*<sup>4</sup> to besport himself with this spouse Bhavani. The river therefore carries flowers, and the young tigers cub. The mothercat why, haven't you seen it—it walks on any garden wall . . .

Were you sure of the tribesman's mantra, there is still terror in your limbs, for you never know where you will emerge. But were you to land in a ditch, or be transported to another world and to another life, you know for a moment you've been to where the Bhavani falls into the silence of the valley, and water foams in frolicsome splendour. Happiness is so simple. You just have to know footpaths. I ask you does the waterfall ever change?

But sometimes sickness may come, and that's another matter. For that's what happened to me.

That year, the year 1941, you remember the summer came so early. It was hardly February when the heat began to rise, and people wondered where it was all going to end up. The grasses grew so dry, people were afraid the cattle fodder would go up in price. The rice fields were getting dried up. For four months we had no rains. People said of course it's the wars, what is there to be done. You cannot commit such crimes and yet the rains fall as normal. Man must pay for his life

<sup>4</sup> The lunar month that falls between December and January.



in slow death. There must be some balance in heaven. When opposites are equalled that is peace. If you kill you get killed, that is the law of nature. Hitler and the British brought about the drought.

Many persons in Trivandrum fell ill with this or that disease. Our Revenue Board, Third Member, Kunni Kutta Nair, fell with a thud into his courtyard, and blood came out of his nose. It was diagnosed as one thing, and he died of another. People too died of cholera. Some had like me strange boils. It started one morning as I began to scratch my feet. The red of my scratch began to blow up. It became round and then yellow. With difficulty I took my bath and limped to the office. From Puttenchantai, as you know, to the secretariat, is just about four minutes' walk. It took ten minutes but the bubo would not burst. When my officer suddenly came up around 11:30, asking for some file, I jumped up, and the bubo burst under me. The fluid just spilled over the floor. I gave my officer the file went into the bathroom (on the way I asked Krishna, the peon, to call the sweeper woman and have the floor cleaned). Once in the bathroom, I found another red spot rising on my thigh. This time there's no question. It almost grew big under my eyes. It was like gauva in a few minutes. But because it gave me no pain, I just went back to my table. In a few hours my whole body except the face had nothing but boils. They rose, grew red and then yellow, and burst like an egg. I went to the chemists and they gave me an ointment and bandage. I walked home with four bandages. I could not touch anything—except coffee, I had such disgust. What's the use of having a wife, for when boils come, do they say, Dear Sir, I am coming, may I come, like a mother-in-law.—They come just like that, and occupy your house. They're of British make, and like everything British, it works without your knowing. Govindan Nair has a simple definition: Britain has no secret service—Britain is secret service. Hitler has bombs, the British have boils. But of the two, which one works, dear sir, great sir. Of course the boils.—Yes the British boils worked. (Some even said the infection was carried back by soldiers from Benghazi. Where there's water in the air, the skin swells to drink up water, is another explanation of Govindan Nair. He has an explanation, as you see, for



everything. And every occasion is serious, intelligible, and final.) That night to come back to my British boils, I was up and hunting my boils like one hunts lice in a girl's hair. I must tell you frankly: I liked it all—just as the girls like lice being killed, there's an acute sense of pleasure when the two nails rub against each other, and the *chit*-sound emerges. The louse is well and happily dead. As a child I have always liked the sound of lice being killed in my hair. It made you feel life was worth something. So that when the British boils came, I just lay down and counted all of them towards the early morning. They were some forty-four—small and big, red, pink and white. When they burst I took away the pus carefully folded it all up in cotton wool, and put it in a corner. When I woke up towards morning ants and lizards were both at it. They were having the feast.

I could hardly walk now. When I woke up (for this happened constantly with me, whenever I needed him but never asked for him, there he would be Govindan Nair), and there he was jumping over the wall. His son Modhu had some cough, and this had kept Govindan Nair awake the whole night. So as he could not go to sleep, he came for a chat. "My son will bring my coffee here. Meanwhile let's talk some nonsense." That's how he always talks.

Ah, I said and showed him the British boils. He looked at the lizards and their feed and said: "Chee, Chee get away," as if they were dogs. For him the whole world was one living organism. Every body—everything understood speech. For him everything was in masculine gender. He had no verbs in his tongue.

So the British boils came in for close scrutiny. He knew immediately what it was. He knew everything for he was so concerned with everything. Once he talked so much on manure that an agricultural expert asked if he was a professor at the local college. Just the same way he talked of the twenty-three types of Enfield guns. Or for that matter of boils. Two cups of coffee were handed down the wall. You just saw hair and hand and Govindan Nair brought in the coffee. The sun was already up and fell on his head. "Ah, you big British boil," he said and laughed.

Let's drive the British out," he declared and after a quarter of an hour's silence—in which he spoke nothing, but played with his toenail—he said: And now for the fight.—In half an hour he had been to Narayan Pandita Vaidyan. The medicine smelled disgusting like horse dung. "To fight evil you must use evil," he declared. I swallowed the paste, and fell on bed exhausted. God knows how much pus had got out of me. Shridhar, Govindan Nair's second son, came in again and again, to enquire if uncle wanted anything. Then I woke up so long afterwards . . . Where was I?

The definition of Truth is simple—you wake up and you are in front of Truth.

For when I woke up I thought I saw someone. But actually it was nobody. It was as if Govindan Nair was there when he was not there but yet he was truly there: one can be and not be but be, and where one is one cannot be seen, for light cannot see light and much less can light see the Sun.

So, when I woke up and frightened said: "Who's there?" I wanted to see something on the chair in front of me. But actually I saw Govindan Nair hiding behind the door. He went to the window (for he was munching tobacco) to spit out and said: "I am Govindan Nair." His son Shridhar stood by him brave and well protected. But what had happened?—in fact. What, I ask of you?

\* \* \*

The facts are there. Shridhar had not been very well, and Narayan Pandita Vaidyan has ordered him complete rest, with oil bath towards noon. So that when Govindan Nair returned for his midday meal (his office was in between the Secretariat and the General Hospital, on the Statue Road — a low-down looking hangar with sacks and a huge red-coloured balance in the middle, and men at the desk counting the ration cards—and above was his high office—) Shridhar usually woke up, held the father's coat and hung it on the rack. Then he took a towel and held it forth for his father to wipe his feet. Meanwhile his brother Modhu would return. Modhu preferred to eat in the kitchen and to have the meal finished and over—thus he ran back to school and had a bout of football. Today

however he did not return—he had some school work. (At such times he usually ate something in the office hotel opposite.) Shridhar took the towel back to the bathroom and came and lay down on his bed.

Govindan Nair was at his meal, and suddenly he said: "And son, what about our delightful neighbour. Is he still emptying his bowels. Has the horse-dung smelling purge worked?" The son answered: "Father, I have not been to see him since ten o'clock, that is since I started on the oil bath. And you, "Govindan Nair started, "and you, my lady, I imagine you are too virtuous to find out whether our friend is living or dead. I fear the medicine was very strong. Ah! our Vaidyans. They know how to purge a calf but not a delicate Saraswath brahmin. Shridhar go and see."

It was a very hot day of March. No, it was actually April, getting on to May. The sun was indeed very hot. The bilva tree seemed more thorn than leaf, more sun than air. Shridhar, so I learned later, jumped down the garden wall, and entered my house from the backyard. He saw me, so he said, lying flat down, my face to a side, my latrine bucket gone rolling on itself, and lying handle out in a corner. I was obviously unconscious. Going to the latrine, the sun was so hot, and I so weak, I must have tumbled, and fallen against the threshold. I could not reach the bathroom. "Uncle is dead, Uncle is dead," shouted Shridhar in terror going to the garden wall. Govindan Nair, so I was told, jumped like a three-year old heifer, washed his hands, and stood by me. He touched me and felt my pulse. He carried me onto my bed. Shridhar fanned me. His wife stood at the wall trying to know what was happening. Govindan Nair jumped back across the wall. He says nothing more.—What did he bring?—The chair was empty. Why are they all in the next room. Shridhar suddenly came in, took a fan and started giving me breeze. From the window I could see Tangamma giving a tumbler of coffee—so hot, she gave a towel with it—to Govindan Nair. "Sir, here is your nectar," he said. "Everybody has his nectar. Mine is tobacco juice, and your's the juice of a black berry. At the ration department we are told we live on thirty ounces of rice per person. I solemnly declare, we live on nectar. Man does not live on terrestrial viands. He lives on the fruits of

heaven." And he laughed, as he propped me up in bed, and holding me by one hand, gave me coffee with the other. Shridhar was fanning me. Tangamma was standing by the wall playing with a trefoil of bilva. Where was I?—Where was Usha? Where was my wife? Does bilva make nectar, I wonder. I must ask it of Narayan Pandita Vaidyan—Suddenly I had to go to the latrine again. The bowels are a tremendous responsibility of man, 300 miles of guts hold a few handfuls of chemical compost. And this little chemical admixture makes or unmakes the stability of man. Funny isn't it.—Govindan Nair said this, and stood by the pillar of the yard. "Call me brother when you want water. Water is our best protector against sin. To smell is sin. To do is no sin. To eat is sin. To purge is bounty. To die is fanciful. Reality is really to die. Shridhar's death is my joke. When you fall unconscious they say you are dead. In fact where were you brother when Shridhar thought you were dead? Were you dead to yourself, my friend? You purge to live. You sleep to die. When sleep is life where is death? Ha, ha, ha?" he laughed, keeping me company from outside, while my bowels were pouring down hot liquid. I thought my guts would come out. There's such innocence in a purged body. Disease is unnatural. Death is natural. To die rightly is to wake and find one has never been.

Shridhar knew his father as he knew his textbook. (He always stood second or third in class. He was in the fourth form.) A cigarette was bought from the Little-shop, and a match box. Sitting by the window Govindan Nair lit his cigarette, while Shridhar returned to give back the matchbox to the shopkeeper,—then standing by me he started to fan. I said: I must build a house of three storeys anyway. My wife can hire out the first two floors if need be. It will be so much capital invested. A house of three storeys these days is a safe investment. How much would it cost. One can live on the third floor.

"Thirty thousand rupees, if there's no inflation after the war," Govindan Nair had declared. "Let's begin buying this house for the moment. A bird in hand is worth two in the bush. Govindan Nair in Trivandrum is worth two wives in Kartikura House. Isn't that so brother?" he said, but looking

towards the wall, he saw Tangamma hide her mouth with the palm of her hand and laugh.

\* \* \*

I have developed a bad habit. I like women. Not that I like all sorts of women. I like woman, in fact. What is a woman you may ask me. For the woman is Shantha?—Shantha is a schoolteacher in the N.S. High School. She is fairly tall, and has delicate hands. I am not particularly tall or fair or good or bad. I am just a man. And Shantha is not just a woman, she is woman. I think often of the child she will bear (that is when it comes out) and I cry with delight even before the time is come. Shantha lives with her mother, and two brothers round near the Poolimood. The brothers go to school. The mother cooks. Shantha earns. (They have some property too—in North Tranvancore.) Shantha also loves. Her house is not far. Only in monsoon are the roads very difficult. Even so we somehow manage to still be with each other. I can cough just a little, then Shantha will put her pillow against my neck. That is why she is so exquisite in her love play. She is shy like a peahen. Her giving is complete. But the truth is who is there to take. I ask of you: If I give you everything, will you take? Can you? There's a story said of Sindbad the sailor. He was told by the Djinn: Take, take all the royal treasury. He opened his hands to take. The hands had changed into gold. (I read this in my story book.) That's taking. Saroja of Kartikura house is a true brahmin. She knows how to take. But Shantha is a Nair. Nair's worship their mother and recognize their father. I worshipped my father and had affection for my mother. The world has to be worshipped. Shantha worships me and has herself. I worship nothing (no, not even the money that will make the three storeys possible) but I don't think I care for anything. Caring for nothing is to use everything for oneself. Caring for oneself is to give things their self. Shantha loves me, and so she will have a beautiful boy. She's not worried about marriage. I am a brahmin. Shantha is not ashamed to be a woman? I am afraid to be a man.

That is why I carry Shantha so badly on my face. When

Govindan Nair wants to speak of her, he simply says, the Vazhavankad house (Vazhavan is a small hamlet in North Travancore). He calls her by her house name as if her house was she. In fact her house is she. In fact also that is how I met her. She came to the Revenue Board on some land division. She looked so innocent, I told her to sit down and took out her file. She was sure her case was right for she could not know how her face could be wrong. Could she think of anything wrong? She was certain she could not. So truth became her thought. If she said, "Come, to me,"—it meant come. If she became my mistress it was because she felt wife. She remained a wife. My feet were there for her to worship. My weaknesses were there for her to learn. My manhood, at least such as I possess, for her to bear children. She had never touched any man before. She said, she knew me to be her man the moment I went to stand against the filing ladder. For a woman love is not development. Love is recognition. The fact that my intestinal troubles improved since I met her proved she was right, so she felt. Devotion to me was proof of her truth. The child was meaning. The woman is always right.

Who told Shantha then that I had fallen unconscious. She said my son (in her) told her so. She went to Govindan Nair's house, and she and Tangamma stood at the wall, while Shridhar came to open my window. Shantha would never come to me. How could she come to my wife's house? She looked from under the bilva tree, her figure all so big, and I could see tears fall from her eyes. She seemed to be more in prayer than in sorrow, so beautiful her skin shone like black ivory, so it had the colour of blue. I could almost (I used to tease her) see the white hands of the child inside her. (For I am sort of brahmin fair). Will this illness have effect on the child? I must build a house, a house three storeys high.

. . .

Destiny brings to us little slips of paper, like the office peon does from some visitor or the boss. What does a name really mean—the British-bubb is a name given by my friend Govindan Nair to an unknown phenomenon in physiological eruption, where pus and blood seem to rise on the skin, round

themselves up like a country mango, and split, and the flies and the lizards have the feast. Now that the bubo is broken, who will feast the lizards? Who will feed the bacilli (if indeed it was a bacillus, and it came from Benghazi. Is it really so hot in Benghazi?) What made some unknown invisible crawly active entity enter into an Indian soldier in his wars with Hitler and Rommel, burst in to a million bloody worms which having travelled through boats, trains, restaurants, (through the files of the sanitary inspectors reports) penetrate into some flies perchance that sat on a cow whose milk my milkman brings, and which having gone into my intestines where the bacilli-field was sort of vacant (like an empty office room, chair and tables put, and the meeting began and the resolution passed), gave me, sir, dear sir, my beautiful British-bubo. Everybody must do something—the clerk must correct his files, the fleas must bite. Illnesses come, and one goes to Narayan Pandita Vaidyan, and the horse-dung medicine be given (for it is termed the British-bubo.)—I go for the purge, the sun is hot, I tumble against the threshold and fall. And that's Shridhar's death. For him an unconscious state is death. What is sleep then to Shridhar? Poor Shridhar is also ill. He had some malaria (or was it filaria)—another flea bite. So he did not go to school. One goes to school when one is well (and Uncle is not ill). Thus the two flea families had made a pact. Across the wall they said, we will change the world. You come from Benghazi and I come from say Uzhavzhapuram. We met and we shall play destiny. Invisible are the ways of destiny. Food will go across the wall—Shridhar will not go to school. *Pappadam* and rice will I take down to Uncle. The bilva tree will bless. Shantha will be carrying six months. I can just see the rise in her belly, from where I lie. Her smile is freedom of the world. It is trust in herself. She looks in as I look out (as Shridhar does). To trust is to be. She can lean against the wall whispering out words to me, as if the world would create itself to her wishes for me. She created a child for herself and gave it to me. She said this is yours—and that is the truth. Who can create a child but God . . . What is the relation between God and Shantha?

"I go and come," smiles Shantha from the wall. She sort of bows to me behind her back. Then slowly I hear the leaves of



the jack-tree crunch under her, the head first blue as the sky, then the hairi (with flat big chignon), and then she is gone. For a long time I go on listening to myself like a lizard. It is beginning to be hot already. Tangamma sends in some coffee through Shridhar to console me. Then Govindan Nair (with sandal paste on his forehead, and his packet of betel leaves and tobacco) jumps across the wall.

"How are you my lord and liege?"

"Better than if the kingdom were at peace and no wars anywhere."

"The Hitlers are in us, like objects in seeing. We think there is Hitler, when Hitler is really an incarnation of what I think. You are bad because I am. You are good because I am. The sun is because I see. You suffer because you are the British-bubo. Ah, brother you too be British,"—and he guffawed. He liked his own jokes, and tears came to his eyes. Then he smiled in love.—I love the British. I respect them because they are such shopkeepers. What can you do after all. If you have to buy you must sell. If you want betel and tobacco, you must work in numbers. You issue ration cards twenty-five thousand a day—and God gives food to the needful. I must say I have never come across so much respect for God as amongst the British. I often think God is a ledger keeper. Loss and gain do not interest him. Accounts do. Even a rat can give trouble to the British."

"How so?" I ask. Govindan Nair's methods are so devious. I just do not understand.

"Rats eat up accounts. That is how we explained away the ration given to Kolliathur village. When the big boss asked: Where are the files?—We made such a grand search. First my boss said: We have misplaced it. Then he said: We do not think we have it in this office.—Finally he wrote: "Eaten away by rats. Please ask the Public Works Dept. Officer to come to ration office No. 66 for inspection. Two reports on rat pest remain unanswered."

"What happened then?"

"He built a house, that is John did. He built a modest little house. He said it was done from the proceeds of his wife's property sales. Her grandmother had just died. Everybody has a grandmother you know."



"Where is the house?"

"On the Karamanu side."

"Is it expensive,"

"Only some fifteen thousand rupees. The brahmins are getting poorer with the wars. So they sell houses. Why, soldiers earn more than clerks. That is the law of the rats."

"What do you do then for the rats?"

"We encourage them. We even invite them, like the pied-piper, with music."

"Seriously speaking?"

"Dead seriously. Rats are necessary for the ration shops. Otherwise who will eat up all the rice.—If you want the population of Trivandrum to feed on food, then you have to employ other means."

"What?" I asked in my denseness.

"Ah, sir, you need a mothercat," he said, as if he were joking with himself, rose and spat out tobacco.

"Shridhar!" he shouted, "bring two cups of coffee."

And settling down, he put some more chalk to his betel, and started chewing again.

"You need education, sir. You are poor in manners. You do not know you have a grandmother. You know so little about rats. You must become a pathologist and write a paper on the nature of bacteria, as seen in ration-shop ledgers. One rich man in the north, so I heard, was travelling in a train.—Where are you going, Seth Sahib, they asked him.—I'm going to Jagannath Puri, sirs. And for the annual festival of the Lord of Earth.—Why, do you belong to hereabouts? they said.—No, sirs, I come from Calcutta. I am a grain merchant, he said.—The famine, we hear, is very serious now, they said.—Yes, sirs, who should know it but me, he said.—It must be terrible, they said.—Yes, I am going to Jagannath Puri. I am giving the Lord a golden spire, the grain merchant said.—Now, I ask of you my friend when shall we build the golden spire?—

"When do you want to?"

"In three months Shantha will have an heir. Let us build a spire ten men high."

"It will be three storeys high."

"First let us build one, two storeys high."

"Anything you like," I said laughing.

"No, sir, it is a dead serious matter. A woman bears a child. The child needs a basic house to be born in. You cannot be born anywhere. Let us buy this house itself, he said, spitting out his tobacco. Shridhar had brought in the coffee. He stood there, amazed and in admiration before his father. His father looked like a sea captain hatching plans to decoy a cargo. The night is falling. The sea is calm. The sea will obey the captain. 'Captain, the sea of Arabia is mild. Turn towards the Laccadive Archipelago. The Dutch ships sail. Who cares if they have guns. We have sinews. You build empires. We build houses. Slaves, to the nor' east!'

One must build a house if one has to have a house. We'll plant a bilva tree by it. Shantha will look at me whispering words. How beautiful it is to be pregnant. Why not always be pregnant and six months carrying. You can play with bilva leaves, and like the hunter, you can go on playing with them. Shiva will appear. I envy women that they bear children.

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Usha will be coming back from school,—I sit and say, as if to the chair. I have a canvas chair, and my feet on its edge. I scratch the curve of my limbs, and I think. The coffee has just been over. I have been to the Home-Links to have my bad cup of coffee. (Sometimes I want to avoid this, and go to the milk bar near my office and gulp a cup of milk. I feel so virtuous after that. But then it is never an immediate friend like coffee. In life we search for truth but live in the illusion of permanence. Milk is good for me—it is good for the mothercat, Govindan Nair will shout and laugh.—No cat will ever touch your coffee. We have no feline instinct. We live like rats, etc., etc.) Thinking of Usha on an evening is a pleasant thing. I can get free and walk with her. Usha is the dearest thing in my life. She is my child. She is not merely that. She is child. When I hear somebody say, he walks, you may think it is an impersonal, a grammatical correct statement. I walk, he walks, they walk. But for me walking is Usha. When she sits it is sitting. Shantha understands this. Shantha's silence has all that logic cannot com-

pute. Saroja wants two and two to make four, and if I say what about it in your dream, do two and two make four, she says it makes six but the logic of dream is six. But I am not living in a dream. Usha is six years old. She is not ten. You can open the school register and see it.—

When you have such logic, what can you do. What logic, Usha must ask herself, has the railway train that says Kim-koo-chig, chug, chug, as if it were a grand-aunt, and it goes on spitting out fire at the Elayathur railway station. The train watches all school returners. Evening after evening it will come and spit out smoke. The cigarette vendors, the wada-sellers, the coolies, the jhatka- and bandi—walas<sup>5)</sup> outside will all have a logic with the train system. Soon after the train arrives, passengers will get out. They have so many bundles. Usha is sure the train knows it. She knows too the jhatkas come in the right numbers. Like there are so many benches at the school every morning for so many children you have so many jhatkas. You have so many bandis. Snakes know when the school children pass. The train has told them: Take care, take care, they are under my protection.—I love Usha for the way she comes back from school. She dreams of the train behind her. She has no fear. For the train will let her pass first on the Sethupallèa bridge. Then you go down and stand in the field below under the small young cocoanut tree. The train is happy. The tree says, Good morning, as the soldiers say to one another. Usha and her colleagues put stones round the tree. They are building a marriage house. Once the train is passed with all the men and women, faces and shouts, Usha feels she can go home. Saroja does not wait for her. She is busy inspecting the choir making. Saroja is a tremendous worker. For her fact is that which yields. Her fathers have left thirty-three acres of wet land. They worked hard. They gave her and her sister education. Land is a fact. You reap what you sow.

I have a system of no logic, and that is the story. What logic can speak of Usha. How and what shall I say about Shantha. She lives backwards as it were when, with her rounded belly, she moves forward. Birth is instantaneous with time. Who is born where? Time is born in time. And that

<sup>5)</sup> Jhatka is a horse carriage and bandi is a cart drawn by bullocks.

is Shantha. To be a wife is not to be wed. To be a wife is to worship your man. Then you are born. And you give birth to what is born in being born. You annihilate time and you become a wife. Wifehood, of all states in the world, seems the most holy. It stops work. It creates, It lives on even when time dies. Suppose you broke your clock, would the garden go? Suppose the garden were burned, where will the sky go?—Such is woman.

I was thinking of the house and Usha, scratching my feet sitting on the canvas chair. The evening will slowly draw in bringing the sea nearer. How the night coming gives tree and sound a peculiar shy truth. They want to hide and go and come. Morning will reveal them, as if they had gone somewhere and returned. The bilva tree always seems on a voyage to nowhere. It has gone and come like a clock that ticks. Time ticks. You close your eyes and open. I want to be free.

Shall I build a house for Usha? Who will give the money, I ask myself. Shantha could if she wished. My office can have her papers signed away, and she could then have her disputed land, and she can sell it. Shantha loves Usha without having seen her. Shantha's house will be the right house for Usha. Vithal my son will inherit from his mother:

"Don't worry, brother," says Govindan Nair, coming in after his bath. He has *The Hindu* in his hand. The newspaper is visible truth, is one of his theories. When truth becomes visible, it is a lie. So the world is a lie, etc., etc.

"As true as *The Hindu*, I tell you I will help you to build the house."

"With what?" I ask.

"With bricks," he says and roars in laughter.

"A house, dear sir, is built with bricks. In dream you can build it in gold. In the *Mahabharatha* you build it in lacquer. I will build it for you in stone."

"But stone will make it hot."

"Stone gives permanence to objects. You must have a house that will last five hundred years. Someone in history will say: This house in stone, in the ruins of Tiruvanandapuram is one thousand one hundred years old. Look at its inscriptions. It is in Roman characters. That was the character used universally for some five hundred years. It was

called the period of the big empires. They set. The Indians quarrelled among themselves. Then the Huns came. We fought the Huns. Some soldiers scratching the wall found a name. It read: Govindan Nair, Ration clerk. They thought it meant a general. Or a prince. He who gives is a prince. I give rations or rather ration cards, so I give food. I am a prince. We will therefore build a palace. The palace of truth."

I never could understand all that he meant. He always seemed to be pulling my leg.—Yes, sir, the cat always meows. That is my nature to say meow-meow. All my language can be reduced to that—meow, meow, meowooow.

I love Govindan Nair.

Hearing I was ill Saroja brought Usha by the morning train. It comes in at 10:10 and she left by the evening local at 4:43. She had boat repairs to inspect—boats had to carry away cocoanut shells. Her land is in the Elayyathour lagoon. A patch of land surrounded by water. There are such deep-bent cocoanut trees. And you hear the sea.

\* \* \*

Shantha said to me one evening: "When my land is sold, we'll buy this house," by which she meant my house. When she said this house she meant naturally my house. She never came there. But this was *this* house for that was mine. That is the way with woman. What belongs to you belongs to me, what belongs to the lord alone belongs. For women is belonging, as mind is belonging—belonging to me. You can only shine of light. The shine knows its light, but to whom does the light belong? Light belongs to light. Lord, how beautiful thou hast made woman. She *tells* you. If woman were not, would you know you were? Shantha said: You, and I saw it. Wonderful is man. He needs to be told he is. Then he knows he is. Looking he sees himself and says: You. He is dumb. He cannot speak. He makes a bare movement of lips. The mirror says so. There is no sound. But sound comes and tells him: You. Who said you?—she.—Thus the world goes moving on its pivot. Usha goes along the railway line. The engine, the railway engine is kind to her. When the wind blows in

gusts, and the monsoon comes pouring through the cocoanut trees, the train blows and blows the whistle, and says: Child, child, I am coming. Please keep away from the railway line. I am your mother. I protect you, even though you see me come and go. I dream of you in my roundhouse. In the Trivandrum roundhouse there are so many old hags. They were all made in foundries before this era was born. But I was born in 1921. I have grown up among cocoanut trees. I have played with the Kanchi and Kali rivers. I know every bridge by its sound. I whistle past the Kartikura house. I know the sound of my whistle wakes up the wildcats on your roof. They have such bright eyes. I come to protect. I am the thread of your lives. What would you do without the railway line? How will you go to school otherwise? The signal is my eldest daughter. The shunting hand my granddaughter. Children, children, who go to school, keep away from the railway line: I am passing.—And the engine floods the line with milky light. Man is protected. You could not be without a mother. You are always a child. The wife is a child who gives you the child. That is why our children resemble us men.

And no sooner the mind is made up, than the hand does. For one morning—or was it evening?—it must have been evening for I could see him with his bare body up to the waist, fresh with a cool bath, a cigarette in his hand (he would not smoke before his morning meal) Govindan Nair came to see me. Fat in his big presence, he stood at the door not wanting to disturb me with his smoke. I adjusted my glasses and looked up. (I must have been at the Malayalarajyam. I was away in the Hitler wars and Churchill communiques.) He said:

“Sir, it’s done.”

I said: “What?”

“I say, sir, it is done. The thing is done. You have it when you want.” I think I understood. But I was not sure. I was afraid to know lest the knowing be false. So I said: “Which?”

He said: “That.”

I was dumbfounded. “And that is?”

“That is this,” he said as if he had said everything. He loved, because of his big heart, to say obvious things in parables, and make you think it was all such a small affair. He

was like Bhima<sup>6)</sup>. You want the flower of paradise? Why, here I go and come.—And Hanuman himself will help, Hanuman his half-brother, unknown unto Bhima. Everybody is half-brother to you, man and thing. So why worry, that is somewhat the principle on which Govindan Nair worked. I am, so you are my brother.

“It’s done.” And he placed the book in front of me. It was covered with browned newspaper. It looked like a school exercise book. He had copied *Astavakra Samhita*<sup>7)</sup>, and he often carried it with him. He liked to recite *Ahamaham Shrotham tava, shortham tava*<sup>8)</sup>. He opened the book and started reading it out to me in beautiful Sanscrit. Though a brahmin I knew less Sanscrit than he. And I understood even less. He recited verse after verse. (Shridhar brought us our coffee.) He read several chapters right through as if they said what he wanted to say. Then he closed the book with the left hand, and started looking at the newspaper. He liked politics. He admired courage. He always loved people who went in search of the paradise-flower. It meant you became half-brother to mankind. Govindan Nair loved slipping in two rupees and five rupees through windows where a child cried. He thought his intentions would help. Fortunately his wife had lands, and the rice came in plentiful. Otherwise, how to live on forty-five rupees a month, a second clerk in the Ration Office No. 66?

Life is a riddle that can be solved with a riddle. You can remove a thorn with another thorn, you solve one problem through another problem. Thus the world is connected. The ration shop is meant to fight famine, and famine is there because there is war, and war because of the British, and the British because of whom? Danes, Normans, etc., say the textbooks. But actually who cares? If you fight the British in the ration shop, you solve the British problem. If you have the British-bubo, you take the horse-dung medicine of Narayan Pandita Vaidyan. You get a disease from Benghazi and Narayan Pandita Vaidyan cures this unknown. The unknown alone

6) A famous story in a dance drama. Bhima a hero of the *Mahabharata* is helped by Hanuman. A figure in the *Ramayana* to find the flower of Paradise.

7) A famous text on pure Vedanta.

8) ‘Listen, child, listen.’



solves the unknown. So, brother, work and be merry, and work in Ration Office No. 66. "Shridhar, go and tell your mother: My friend is languishing because he has no strength in his limbs. His flower of paradise is coffee bean. When it is burned black and its powder is made into a collation, its effect on limbs and mind is excellent, for mind and heart. Sir, let us go on to our *Astavakra*."

Govindan Nair, sat on the veranda of my house. He forgot his food. My stomach was bubbling with demand. Fortunately the coffee had come in once again. Till nine o'clock, he read the *Astavakra Samhita* from beginning to end, and then he said: "I have done a good job. I have taught the brahmin what Brahmin is. After all ruling princes taught Sadhus the Truth in the Upanishadic times. Now Nairs alone can teach the Truth in the world"—I knew at once he was right. He was right. He is right. He will ever be right.

"It's time for the coming?" whispered Tangamma from the wall. "The children have gone to sleep."

"Good night, Sir," he said as if he had said what he wanted to say to me, jumped across the wall—there was such flowing moonlight on the bilva tree—I walked thoughtfully along the road to the Home-Links. Would they still have chapathis? A hungry stomach is a bad friend. It smells bad.—There were chapathis, Ananthkrishnan said, for I felt good.

\* \* \*

The Ration Office No. 66 is just above the ration shop No. 181. As I told you, it is on Statue Road, between the secretariat and the General Hospital, just off the house of Justice Chandra Sekhara Iyer (the man known in Trivandrum for having hung more people in his lifetime than any other living man—for him evil was concrete, and he had it removed from the mass of mankind. So he gave the best punishment. "It makes our daughters hope for better marriages," he said. And it did.) Chandra Sekhara Iyer of course, as everybody knows, died and died far away and well; in some Nile-hermitage he had constructed overlooking the vastness of the seas. Nobody did him any harm. People knew he was just. He lived like a hermit, with but one family servant, and he died peacefully reciting some mantra. His ashes were flown to Benares. So he died a happy man.



Just next to this house, almost touching his casuarina tree at the door is the ration shop No. 181. It is an old garage of Mr. Shiva Shankra Pillai, the retired Tahsildar, who himself married from Mavelikara, that is from just where Her Highness the Maharani comes. Shiva Shankra Pillai had two sons and both of them turned bad. One engaged himself and went to the wars a subaltern. The other opened a cloth shop at Chalai, and is doing some business. The daughter is well married—she is the daughter-in-law of Kunni Khrisna Menon, and she lives happily. All that is old is stable. Otherwise how could you say it is stable? It is stable because it is traditional. So Kunni Krishna Menon with huge estates run well continued the tradition of his ancestors. He and his wife amassed a fortune—thus Shiva Shankra Pillai's daughter was happy. These children often came home and generally went through the ration shop up to the ration office. The garage had drivers' quarters at the top. This and the garage were extended so that the ration shop office ran all over in pentagonal shapes, with four rooms at the top and five at the bottom. The children liked to play among the chillies and tamarind, for this also was sold as a side issue by the ration shop vendor to make a little extra money—his program was, he who eats rice cannot eat it alone, so why not make some more profits, Government or no Government, who is there to come and see?—and sometimes the children went and sat in the huge scale, shouting and chafing, one weighing against the other till the women, who came with their baskets and sacks, would jerk and let the balance go from one side to the other as if it were a cradle. And the louder shouted the children, the wilder became the crowd. Meanwhile, people from the street came rushing forward to see this fun, and old ladies standing in the queue would say: "The sun is hot for us. The fun is over now. Why make us hunger more?" And from the staircase of the ration shop, a head or two would show that under the ration office is the ration shop, and that one does not play with such serious things here. What is this nonsense going on? The first to come would, of course, be Govindan Nair, his underclothes prominent (it was always too hot for him) and his pen in his hand. He had a long nose, pointed and expressive, and when he turned anywhere, it was as if he could speak with his nose. He looked

at the children and laughed. Then, going to the balance, he pushed the needle to the middle and said: "Everything in the world weighs the same. Look, look." And the women looked up and saw and said: "Of course, look, everybody weighs the same. How did he do it?" The children lost some fun. When he let go, he did so with a bump, so the younger child went up shouting: Father! Father! Then he caught hold of one of the children of the crowd and set it against the uplifted child. The balance went down with a thud. The elder child called Gopi cried. "Gopi, Gopu," said Govindan Nair, "you can't always be on the top. Even Hitler sometime has to come down. Now, children, you go home to grandpapa. When you come next time I'll build you a swing in the garden. And I will sit with you under the casuarina tree. And we shall see the sky."—Meanwhile, half the ration office No. 66 — except, of course, the boss, Bhoothalinga Iyer, (he lived in the fort near the temple, an honest, disgruntled man with bun on his head, namam<sup>9)</sup> on his face, and a *Ramayana* on his lap—such he sat, looking after the ration office) would come down.

There are very few interesting faces in the ration office. Abraham is a Christian from Nagercoil, and he looks the very image of Christ with his flat face, and the longish beard. He hurts no one, he earns enough for his childless wife and himself, and he smokes incessantly. Sometimes he talks poetry to Govindan Nair, especially of Eletchan, and they compare notes on Malayalam words. When everything is over, Govindan Nair will say: "Man, how can you know Malayalam? You have to be a Nair." Abraham accepted this as an axiom. Only a Nair can know Malayalam. Only a Nair can belong to Malabar. Only a Nair can see right. Look at the boss Bhoothalinga Iyer. He can no more understand truth than can the buffalo see a straight line. Velayudhan Nair is the opposite number of Govindan Nair. He is tall and fair and shouts at the top of his voice that his father was a brahmin. That did not make him equal either to Bhoothalinga Iyer or to Govindan Nair. He was one with one and other with the other. He manipulated ration cards with a facility that made everybody wonder whether he had learned street jugglery. There was that famous case. Ration card No. 65477919, which

<sup>9)</sup> Sacred marks.

had just disappeared from the office. The register marked the name Shankra Pillai, of Medi Vithu, Palayam. The thumb impression of Shankra Pillai was there. His house people say they have been getting the right rations. But when asked about the card, they say they never received it. Inquiries brought forward four or five such cases. Govindan Nair just joked. He knew A from B as he knew left eye from right eye. He knew the matter just enough to show Velayudhan Nair, he knew. So Velayudhan Nair smiled to him, and thought he too, would know what is to be known and perform what is to be performed. After all, sir, it is war time and everybody has children. Two is the limit—but then if you have three. On seventy-seven rupees, how can you feed a third child? Especially if it has a bit of difficulty in the spleen? Three years old and she has the belly of one of eight. Spleen may just be a pouch on the left side of man but it gives infinite trouble. It makes the child bloat and cry. What can you do with a child's cry? Doctors are expensive—even Government doctors. They don't take fees, but they like gifts. What is the gift for a good-sized spleen? Thirty rupees, etc., etc.

Velayudhan Nair's wife, when you see her at a cinema. has such an array of bangles on her hands. She inherited some money from her aunt. We all have aunts. Why don't we inherit, is a pertinent question, and Govindan Nair who is pertinence itself, asked it. He was interested in children, in houses for children, in medicines for spleen that bloats, etc. When one is curious one can know anything. It's like the kitten seeking the cat, etc. (I use etc., because that is exactly Govindan Nair's language. It comes from working in offices disinterestedly, he says, does Govindan Nair.)

So, to use his phrase, the cat came out of the bag. It was a big cat and the bag was a gunny sack. It smelled peculiarly of rice. There's a saying of Kabir they often quoted in the ration shop: On each grain of rice is writ the name of the man who'll eat it. The ration card is the proof. Medicine for spleen is proof of the ration card. The child is proof of his father, said Velayudhan Nair showing his child to Govindan Nair. "My son has no spleen. He has malaria, or filaria. I don't know what it is." "You must take him to a decent doctor," said Velayudhan Nair. "Who is your doctor?" he

asked. "Why, doctor Velu Pillai, M.B.B.S. M.R.C.P. from Edinburgh. Specialist in children's diseases."—"My son is seven years old. He is neither a child nor a man. So where shall we take him?" laughed Govindan Nair.—"Why," replied Velayoudhan Nair, "I have just a fellow for that. You come here tomorrow at five. And we'll settle it."

"Ah, sir, the cat is out of the bag," he said coming to see me that evening. Hitler was winning his wars. The prices went up. The British army poured into India. India sent rice to Persia. Russia attacked the German left flank. Meissenberg was defeated on the Volga. Vichy decreed against the Jew. Roosevelt was wiping his spectacles—that was one of the pictures stuck against the wall in our office. We liked Roosevelt because we hated Churchill. We love what we cannot have. When we have it, we have it not, because what it is not, is what we want, and thus on to the wall. The mothercat alone knows. It takes you by the skin of your neck, and takes you to the loft. It alone loves. Sir, do you know love? O, Lord, I want to love. I want to love all mankind. Why should there be spleen when in fact there is no spleen? Why don't children sit in balances and play at the game of ration cards? Who plays, Lord, who plays? "Give unto me love that I love," such was the prayer that went up from across the wall to nowhere. "How is Shantha?" asked Govindan Nair abruptly, as if suddenly he had seen the mothercat with the kitten, and I said: "She was asking your wife about a good maternity doctor. Dr. Krishna Veni Amma is no good. She is too young. Do you know of one?"

"Yes," he said. "I am seeing a child's doctor tomorrow. I think he will do."

What is a doctor? One who knows diseases is the simplest definition. One who knows a wound and heals a pain is a doctor.

Five o'clock on any watch (including the one on the secretariat) is five o'clock all over the world. The world is regulated by a watch. What is a watch? A thing that turns on itself and shows the moon. What is the moon? The thing that turns on itself (and elliptically) goes around the sun. And what is the sun? The sun is a luminary that makes the earth—the grass rises green on the earth, the clouds form, the

dawn comes, the cattle go home—man puts manhood into woman and the child is born, the tree shoots into the air, and birds sit on them, houses rise, houses, and our children when they are born, they are well looked after...That is all due to the sun. And the moon. And the clock on the secretariat. (If the Government did not run, then who would pay whose debt?) So, at five fifteen, Velayudhan Nair went over to the table of Govindan Nair (and what an ocean of ration cards were there, with cigarette butts, shirt buttons, broom grass for cleaning the ears, sandal paste—on little banana leaves—dry flowers, books—Eletchan and one or two books on Atma Vidya—and in the drawers would be pencils, razor blades, stitching needles, and pice. To buy a cigarette the pice is easier to give than an anna. Cooper makes the waste simpler. And the boss does not mind it as long as it is cheap and he knows you are not making money on ration cards. Two rupees a ration card is the official blackmarket price, if you want to know. If you have children you can have ten. To have ten children is permitted by law. The neighbours have no objection. "So we have ten children. Look how well fed I look. My wife has a ruby ear ring. Look, look at her, etc., etc.")

Velayudhan Nair says: Man, we go to the doctor. (Govindan Nair always began every sentence with Man, for he had been to Bombay. In Colaba every De Souza says: Man. This they learned from the P & O ships. And P & O ships touch Plymouth. Do they say: Man there, one wonders.)

"[So, Man, we go to the doctor," he said.

"Mr. Man I come," said Govindan Nair. He sometimes used Mister to show he too could be elegant. He called his son Mr. Shridhar. ("Mr. Shridhar go and get me a chew.—Mr. Shridhar the thing that father puffs is wanted, etc., etc.") —Mr. Shridhar therefore brought the chew tobacco or that which father puffs, according to orders.)

Velayudhan Nair: Man it is hot.

Govindan Nair: Mister, it cannot be cold in April.

Velayudhan Nair (wiping his face): Yes, but we will have to wait at the doctors.

Govindan Nair: Why is he such a busy man?

Velayudhan Nair: Busy? He is as busy as he wants to be.

So we go, said Velayudhan Nair, and Govindan Nair pulled the shirt over his body and there they were going to the doctor. The doctor lived off the Main Road, before you come to the temple. You know as you go down after the railway bridge, there are a number of cloth shops. Then if you turn to the right—the first lane after where the policeman stands—you come to a small square. A pleasant rain began to fall. It was refreshing, this cool shower of the heavens. They went up an ordinary tier of house steps, knocked at a much knobbed door (more like houses in Madras than here) and they entered. It was a living house, obviously, for there was a swing in the far end of the corridor, in the huge hall, where there were many lights. Perhaps the clouds had made the house dark. Suddenly the sun shone and the lights went off. There were many ladies inside the house. There were also some men.

"The doctor is a busy man. Let me go and see," said Velayudhan Nair, and went towards the swing.

Govindan Nair sat on a sofa and started reading the *cheeranjivi*.

Nothing is pleasanter than a doctor's waiting room. You have the pleasantest thoughts because you know the doctor will say: "You have no disease. This is not pneumonia. This is a bad cold. This is not venereal, this is only British-bubo, etc."

Before you had time to say Rama Krishna, there he was, Velayudhan Nair. They both entered a huge room, opening on the back yard where a lonely neem-tree stood. There were many soldiers there, their hands tatooed, there were Government officials in slick clothes, there were merchants and even some communist leaders (who had just been let out of jail). There were bottles on the table. You could hear women's voices from the other side of the corridor. How they shrieked or hissed or you heard them sing. One or two of them came out in high-heeled shoes. Some were smoking and even speaking English. A girl came in — an Anglo-Indian no doubt and spoke in soldiers' tongue. The men that came out were adjusting their clothes and pulling their ties, and laughing. Some of them had their hands on their hair, quite thoughtful. Life looked gay and remote and not altogether comfortable. Life is like that. Life is a ration shop. The balance weighs

everything according to the ration card. Where is your ration card, Sir? Green, red or blue?

Girls were obviously gathered in the back of the big room. This is Shiva Shankra Pillai, muttered Govindan Nair introducing a sleek middle-aged man, with an ochre shirt, a clean white elegant dhoti glasses on him and truly to speak a gentle sweet-looking man. "He is in charge of the hospital," said Velayudhan Nair and started smiling as to himself.

"If the patient should come in and choose his doctor, it would be nice. Like they say in America they have different doctors for different diseases, we have different cures for different horoscopes as it were, and according to experts. But let us go in." Shiva Shankra Pillai opened a big door, and Govindan Nair walked in. A large bed lay between the corner and the window to the right. There was also an office table and a chair. A gentle light fell on everything. Even pencil and paper were laid there, on the table, as if on purpose. "We write love letters here," he joked. A girl came in from behind, round, with nose-ring and necklace, with black hair and a rich bosom. She was shy. "The patient may undress, while the doctor is getting ready," said Shiva Shandra Pillai, and went out. He seemed serious in saying this.

The rich bosom heaved. The *choli* came open. The girl started cooing and singing. She danced a mellow dance. Govindan Nair looked at this with fascination. "What a beautiful woman you are," he said. "Beauty is the core of music." And she continued to dance. Govindan Nair did not rise up. He simply said again: "You are beautiful, I can see." Then she stripped herself and lay on the bed. The gold necklace fell so curvedly about her breast. Her shape was comely, a little fat above the down of the belly. She had much public hair, he observed. So she does not shave those parts.

"How many children do you have?" asked Govindan Nair.

"Two," said the girl and added after a long pause: "My name is Lakshmi."

"Oh, my name is Lakshmi," she repeated.

"Two—it means sixty-four ounces," he said as if in justification.

"What's that?" she asked, hoping he would come, and caress her.



"It's just the worth of man —at the ration shop."

"Why do you work there?" she asked, rising up. Her breasts were a little drooping but very rapt and succouring, beautiful. Govindan Nair once wanted to paint.

"Why don't you work in one. We all live on rations," he said smiling. "What is your salary?" he asked.

"Six rupees a day plus tips. Good men are good. Sometimes they even give me a necklace. Look at this one. It was given by a *Seth* from the north. I did not understand his language. He did not speak mine. But he came in after he had gone, and gave this, and said: Be happy."

"Are you happy?" asked Govindan Nair. The girl threw a bit of her sari on her body.

"Are you?" she asked.

"Can't you see I am happy?"

"Where does it come from?"

"Where does water come from?"

"Where does water come from?"

"From the tap?"

"And the water in the tap?"

"From the lake?"

"And the water in the lake?"

"From the sky."

"And the water in the sky?"

"From the ocean?"

"And the water from the ocean?"

"From the rivers."

"And the river waters?"

"They make the lakes."

"And the tap water."

"Is river water."

"And so?"

"Water comes from water," she said.

"I am a kitten," he said.

She seemed frightened. She covered her pudic parts with her sari.

"What?" she asked.

"I let the mothercat carry me."

"And so?"

"And the river flows."



"And then?"

"The lakes give water to taps."

"Then?"

"Man is happy : Because he can build a house three storeys high. When his woman is going to have a child, he will build a house, two storeys high. He will marry her and build his child a house. The child, the child, he cries as if in a tragic tenderness, "the child will have a house to grow in. Oh, children need houses. And women need husbands."

"I had a husband," she said—"Yes," she said.

"What happened to him?"

"He died in the wars."

"Who killed him?"

"The British."

"Why?"

"Because he would not shoot at the Germans."

"And how did you come here?" he asked.

"And how did you come here?" she said.

"I came because I work in a ration office. I distribute physical happiness to him that wants."

"And not to her that wants?"

"I have a she—and she wants it and I pour it into her. Nobody can give. Only the mothercat can give."

"Give me!" she cried.

"Come tomorrow to ration office No. 66. I will give you a card, a family card. Between ten and five we are always there."

She sank back on the bed. Govindan Nair observed she had flowers in her hair. She was gazing at the ceiling. Just a tear or two was dropping from a side, marking her face with collyrium. She looked lovely in her well-knit limbs, her sorrow which heaved her breasts—there was such pain where the centre of her body lay. He put his hand there and said: Forgive.

His touch seemed magical. She flung up and put her arms around him, her breasts against his face. He bowed low, made a namaskar, and stood up. How can man make a woman suffer? How can anyone touch a body so smooth, a face so gentle, so helpless, the Seth's necklace speaking a strange tongue against her imbibing navel. Her hair was so perfect.

"The British did it?" he said.

"Yes. Man did it," she said.

"May I go?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, like a wife to a husband. Tenderly she rose, covered herself, and stood up like a daughter before a father. He turned as if to hide his emotions. Of course pen and paper were there. Everything was typed and ready. He signed the paper. Ration Shop Licence No. 9181 in the District of Ummathur. In the village of Udasekarapuram. Name of the holder. Shiva Shankra Pillai. Address. Main Street. Murtaarakara. Valid up to April 3, 1944. Signed: P. Govindan Nair. The signature was clear and round as the eyes of a child. Lakshmi was dressed by now. She looked so clean, so like a brahmin lady near the temple streets.

"Your husband will come back?" he said.

"They shot him," she said.

"No, they did not. I have the ration cards of all the soldiers. I have his name, I am sure, in the office. Our working hours are between ten and five."

"Bless me, as if I were your daughter," she said.

"My sister," he said.

And when she lifted up her face, her whole being was lit. She was going to find her husband! Life is like that. You get what you want. But do you know what you want? "Do you really know? Mister, that is the problem," said Govindan Nair that evening to me. "You do not want to build this house. I really want to. Shantha will have a child. She is your wife. A wife must have a house. You have a son. I prophesy," he said, and jumped across the wall as if carried away like a kitten.

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I want to take you to London, will you come? I want to take you to Paris, Delhi, New York, will you come? Will you really come? Don't you hear the koel sing on the cocoa-nut tree, don't you have the anguish that eats up your heart with itself, cuts it and pickles it, and savours it, and says: Look what a good heart I have. I am a woman. And I have such a good heart. What will you give me in return, my lord?

I will give you, woman, a house of three storeys high. Lord, may that rise. And do not forget the windows that go running along the wall towards the sea. I must have eleven windows on the sea. A window on the sea is a window on God, Buy me a plot and build me a house four quarters wide, and that will have a tamarind tree in the backyard for the baby's swing, a row of dahlias (like Europeans have) in a bed to the right, and a mango tree that will stretch and burden itself with such riches that, when the koel sings, we know its song will make the fruit ripen. For the women with a womb that has grown round, what one needs is ripe rich rasapuri mangoes. Cut them, peel the skins off and Mother, give them to me with a silver plate. And one cup of milk immediately after.—Oh Shantha, how beautiful you look in your pregnancy. You look like Panchali herself.—I am no Panchali or Damayanthi, mother. I am just woman. Lord, may I just be woman. Let me bear womanhood. He has given me his manhood that my womanhood be. If I were a queen I would build a wall of wattle round the garden and I would then hear the sea. The sea knows me.

White is the foam that goes gathering along the sea, white as the skin of snake, with ripples and roughs, and the last song of despair. The sea lurches and tears from inside. O Sea, where will you take me? Will you take me to the nether world of Iagas and tie me a chignon wound with a big bun? I shall bear a large kukum and my ear lobes will touch my arms. I want to hold my child so wide, he would touch ten distances wide. I want to love. I want to kiss my child. Lord bear me and build me a house.

Like a pirate on the high seas (in the time of the Dutch, so to say) is Govindan Nair. He can command a crew of ten *Moplas* and in any language you like. He could put a bark on to the sea and say: Sea, take it, and the sea would heave and bear you to where the isles are. Truth goes over the sea for the isles are to be blessed. The sea gulls know truth is a breath of Antartica. Did you know for example if you stand at the southern tip of Travancore and look down against your nose, straight down lies Antartica, rich in its fissures of fishes. The fishes of Antartica are made of gold. Gold is dug there. They discovered a tablet there, and some years ago, which

showed they probably wrote in Dravidian tongue. Antareticta is our home. They used to grow pineapples there. You can get congealed seeds there. The bones of its people are all long and thin, an-Aryan,—their heroes lie by cocoanut shields made on tropical seas. I know where they came from. They came from Malabar. Malabar is Truth. Antaretica is only a name for Malabar. So, we'll go by Catamarans and down the seas to where the isles lie. Let us go and quarry there. There are stones there like ice frozen for a million years. They have the colour of human eyes. What a fine thing to build a house of eyes—of cats' eyes—. Lord, the sea is far and I a man. But, look, look, at the silver bark that stands. Truth goes on a ride. We'll ride with truth. Ancient temples lie there. Nobody worships there. The seas meet in Antaretica. Lord, help me build a house.

That's what Govindan Nair said coming to see me the next morning. "Mister, I had such wonderful dreams. I wanted to build you a house in ice and give you a garden. I want to give you a large tree at the back for the child's swing. And a mango for the pickles in front. You will then hear a lot of birds. We'll get a pair of peacocks too and your child will dance. How do you like that?"

Govindan Nair looked indeed as if he had ploughed the seas.

At about nine o'clock in the morning while we were sitting and playfully gossiping, what should happen but somebody knocked at the door. It was my fat landlord. A towel tied round his head (for he had a bad cold,—it had rained during the night a little) he was smoking a cheroot. Morning and evening it never left him. His name was Murugan Nadar, and as his name said, he tapped palm trees for toddy—huge lorries and bullock carts carried the white frothing invigorating drink, and people sang praises of themselves singing songs, and they sang him out money with which he built these houses. He was not a bad man—he was a good man. He thought of the bathroom and the kitchen with such care; every housewife blessed him for it. He even ran a hotel—called the Madhura Town Hotel—and the inmates there spoke so well of the tap that ran with hot and cold water (unknown in Trivandrum, except at the Mascot Hotel, and that is run by the Government). Since

the war started, he payed as much as 37 rupees a yard for the Hume-pipes, and that is blackmarket price. He wanted to be just. He made his seventeen percent profit—that is what his father and his father's father had fixed in the good old times as decent income on any investment; and the rest he gave to you:—I spent fourteen thousand rupees on building Kamala Bhavan—(which you remember is the name of the house I live in)—and, sir, take it for eighteen and three. It satisfies you and it satisfies me.

“Here are seven,” said Govindan Nair as though he were producing the money. (Usha who had stayed on with me was still fast asleep in my room. On hearing the sound of such a large sum of money, she rose up, and came scampering to find out what was going on outside her dream. She knew her father lived in many, many worlds.) So Usha said:

“Father, who is this?”

“Your grandfather,” answered Govindan Nair, as if led by intuition. The Nadar was silent, and then with a sigh, he wiped the lone tear at the corner of his eye. Why should one not be a grandfather? Is it so difficult a thing? Do not toddy pots get full in the morning, once you tie them to the tree at night? Why should not my daughter bear a child? A child, sir, a grand-child is what man must see to prove he dies well. The question, however, is, can one die? Must one die?

“This house will be yours, Usha,” said Govindan Nair, and for some reason Usha started shrieking and said: “Mother, take me away, Mother I want to go home.”

“What is your name, child?” asked the Nadar.

“Her name, sir, is Usha Devi—Usha Devi Pai,” said Govindan Nair. And taking Usha on his lap, he added:

“And she will be my daughter-in-law. Shridhar is seven years and eight months old. Usha is six years and two months old. That makes a nice match,” said Govindan Nair, stroking her hair. “I’ve even thought of their horoscopes. She is Sagittarius and he’s Pisces, with Jupiter in the eleventh house. She will make him live long. I want a son that lives long.”

“Are you an astrologer too, Mr. Nair?” asked the Nadar.

“If stars govern me, then I must know the stars. If the Travancore Police Manual governs all police officers (and the public) then we must know it too. Travancore is a paradise

that follows police rules. If the ration department were under the police, there would have been no corruption. We'll build a house yet, sir. Then what is your final price?"

"My price is always final."

"Oho, is that so?" spoke Govindan Nair as if to himself.

"If Usha becomes my grand-daughter I will reduce it by eighteen hundred rupees."

"If she lives in your house, she's your grand-daughter. So, make it seventeen thousand."

Nadar somehow consented. Once he gave his word he never changed. So it shall be seventeen thousand. Meanwhile Tangamma was handing down coffee from the wall. It was hot, steaming hot. The Nadar preferred a smoke. When the last cup came, Usha stood under the bilva tree and Tangamma had to bend low to give it to the child. Shridhar was ill with some fever.

"When Advocate Krishnanan Nair comes send him here."

"He is already there, reading his newspaper," said Tangamma.

"Hey!" shouted Govindan Nair, "Hey, Advocate, Advocate General, future Chief Justice, please come sir. We are ready."

The advocate impeccably dressed came down the wall as if he were coming to a marriage to perform the marriage. He only needed the copper vessel and the sacred bundle. Why, he had the bundle even. Didn't you see it. Tangamma brought another cup of coffee. She bent down and gave it to Usha. Usha brought it and gave it to Krishnanan Nair. The cheroot smoked itself away. We lived in a sort of jabbering silence.

Who was talking to whom? Who talked, in fact? Nobody talked, and we all understood.

By now the cheroot was finished. The coffee, too, was finished. Govindan Nair produced a table, and the advocate took out and placed before us the three hundred rupees Government paper. He had written down on a piece of yellow note, all about the thirty cents of the land, in Putten Chentai, belonging to Murugana Nadar, and situated in Plot No. 705. Survey number 45176. Municipal number b63. My name was mentioned as at marriage or funeral, father's name, grand-

father's name. Usha Devi Pai was the chief character of the story, as it were. The house was bought for her for seventeen thousand rupees. Including the yield of the cocoanut trees, etc., etc., Govindan Nair jumped across the wall, and went to the National Typewriting Institute near the Post Office. Meanwhile the Nadar told me of his grandmother who was a great lady, and a beauty in Madur. They said she could stop a flood with a mantra, such her looks. She spoke to the Goddess as if she knew her from always. She spoke in classical Tamil. In some past life, so astrologers said, she was born a princess and was married off to the Chiefs of Madurai. She walked in the palace as if she knew it all. From that came their love of houses. They built and built everywhere in Madras, in Mysore, even in Ootycammund. They had no children. Their daughter had done every pilgrimage. She was thirty-seven and no children came. They never made a false statement, they always took seventeen percent interest. Even so, no child came, and no dream came to make the child come. Sadhus had blessed, and some had even given cocoanuts with mantras. Nothing came of all these holy acts. Well, sir, that is as the Lord Subramanya wishes.

The National Typewriting Institute has a very good reputation for job works. How well it was documented. It made your heart shine gold such the excellence of the typing. I put my signature. Ramakrishna Pai. S. Ramakrishna Pai. Then Govindan Nair signed as witness. Usha drew an Om, and Govindan Nair certified her signature. Murugan Nadar put his signature, and somehow wept. He just did not know. Tangamma handed over to Usha (across the wall) betel leaves and cocoanut, and even tobacco to chew. She had run back as Shridhar was in some sort of delirium. The doctor had promised to come at three. Govindan Nair went home and ran back quickly. I entered my room and brought his seven thousand rupees. Usha handed the money to Murugan Nadar. In ten months the rest of the money will be paid in two installments. The house became mine—I mean Usha's. Murugan Nadar (he was about sixty-five) began to smile, and seemed almost happy now. He took Usha on his lap. Then he lifted her up to his arm. "What a sweet child," he said, and stood up. Govindan Nair said: "She is the true owner."



"Permit me, sir" said Murugan Nadar, "permit me to take the child home. I would want my wife and daughter to see her. May I keep her till the afternoon."

"Of course."

"But Shridhar is ill. I want to see him," said Usha. They had built a little stone stand from which they spoke to each other across the wall.

"Shridhar will be well. The doctor is coming," assured Govindan Nair.

The Nadar took the child in his arms, and smiling to himself, closed the garden door. Usha was going to see grandmother. Was she beautiful, was grandmother? Will she give me glass bangles? Will she take me to the temple? "Grandfather," she said, "will you take me to the temple once."

"Why, we'll go now. We'll go home and take grandmother. We'll go to the temple," he said.

How beautiful the god was you will never never know. The god lay in samadhi, his one wife at the feet and another rising from his navel, blue he lay and in sleep. Grandfather wept profusely. One weeps in temples. Grandfather went then to Chalai bazaar and bought Usha two ankle bands in silver. She looked so lovely she wanted to go back to the temple.

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There's only one depth and one extensivity and that's (in) oneself. It's like a kitten on a garden wall. It's like kittens walking on the garden wall. It's like the clock of the secretariat seen through a mist of clouds—time moves on according to a moon (and the sun) but the offices go on working, people scribbling, smoking, typing, belching, scratching, farting fast, fibbing, exuding asafetida perspiration, or the acrid smell of butter milk—there will be peons to whom a rupee warrants well, but two warrant more, and up the staircase you go, one, two and three, and each step is worth a rupee on to the first floor. On the second floor the prices are the higher. You pay ten rupees a step. And on the third, it's like the Maharaja's power, you pay according to the stairs. And above it all sits time like nether world recorder asking no questions. It revolves on itself and when the hour comes it ticks. And off it goes—something. What is it that is gone? What is time?



What is death? In fact you could ask what is life. You issue a ration card. Your house number, numbers of the family, are all indicated: you are class A.B.C. or D. You buy what you want and when you want, but what is available. Governments are notoriously mismanaged. A railway wagon might have gone off to Coimbatore, containing rice for Cannanore or Conjeevaram. What matters is that the station begins with C. Coimbatore, Conjeevaram, Canuanore. It could almost make a nice mantra. Life is only such a mantra—you go saying life life, or in Sanscrit jeeva jeeva (and in Sanscrit it sound more real) so you go on living. Jeeva is life. So I live. There is a clock tower. Then there is the ration shop. Ration office No. 66 is just above it. The Revenue Board is under the clock tower, and that is where I work. Down the road that goes to the hospital is the ration office No. 66. That is where Govindan Nair works. His face is full now. I have a house. I have laid the foundation for myself—and through time. The secretariat clock will go on chiming for ever, and as long as it chimes, and it will go on chiming for ever—could you imagine a state without a government?—and you have permanence. So permanence is the secretariat with the clock tower. I hear the clock chime at night from my house. Thus I live a bit of eternity. My house has a garden wall. There is as you know a bilva tree by the wall. A hunter once broke twigs off the bilva, as you will remember, and down the leaves fell on the oval emergence of the alabaster. Shiva was pleased with this unconscious worship. I look towards the garden wall. Lord I am not even a hunter that in his nervousness lets down bilva leaves. Lord, what hope is there for me?

Govindan Nair always appears at such a moment. These are the sort of thoughts that run through me on a morning. I usually wash my face and feet. Then I go to the Home-Links for my coffee and *upma*. By the time I return the *Malayalarajyam* is on my veranda. I read it from beginning to end, about Hitler and the wars, Churchill and his speeches, and then I begin to scratch the curve of my feet. I will have a house now, my own. Usha is lying inside. She will wake soon, and say Father. What a mysterious word it is. Father, she says. As if I were able to be cause of anything. For

Father simply means cause of her. And the cause of cause, what is it. Is it not she? Could there be father without a daughter? What would Usha be without me? What would this house be if I did not own it? Is it not possible not to own it and yet it would somehow be mine? Air I own not, and yet I breathe. I breathe myself. Do I own I?

Such are the terrible thoughts that oppress me. Govindan Nair is my guide. He lives across the wall, and somehow the bilva tree gives him an aura. It's like an umbrella above him. It gives him spiritual status. So, Govindan Nair comes and says:

"Mister, I am in serious trouble."

"What?" I ask.

"My son is seriously ill."

"What illness? He just had fever."

"Shantha is there. She will tell you."

"But what is it?"

"It's called fever. But it might any day be called pneumonia."

"How did it come?"

"Just as its name came. From somewhere. He played in the rain planting roses. He got wet. Then he came here and stood talking to Usha across the wall. So you could say Usha gave it to him."

"What?"

"Since you want a cause, anything is the cause. The more innocent a thing the more mysterious is the cause of the most grave. You wear a Gandhi-cap—a two-anna piece of one-foot-cloth that a man can put on his pate, and that not even what his irreverent bladder empties could be held in the cap's depth, such its size—yet you could get arrested for anti-British activity. Innocence is the most dangerous thing in the world. So Usha is the cause of Shridhar's illness."

"Don't you make fun of me. Tell me seriously."

"I say seriously, sir. All I talk is serious. If not, would I blow my precious foul breath to the world?" He looked almost angry. "Do you think I joke when I say Usha is the cause of my son's illness? She is six years old. He is seven years old. They stood under the bilva tree and said many serious things. Did you know what they said to one another?"

She touched his cheek and said: you are like my brother. And he said: Father says you are my wife. And she became so shy, she ran away. So, off he ran, Shridhar, to Shantha, and said: Mother Shantha, make Usha my wife.—He prayed. She said: Why not when you grow up? When the koel is big it makes a nest. When the koel is big and another koel comes, they make a nest to which eggs are born. When you can build a nest, you will marry Usha.—But Usha has a house now, he said. Can I not be married now that she has a house? And we will grow eggs.—Usha got fever that night. She thought she was growing eggs. Next morning she went to the latrine. She was so afraid she threw off her eggs. She is all right now. Shridhar got the disease. He does not know how to throw it off. "I must buy him a house, too, perhaps," said Govindan Nair and kept silent. "It's a good idea if I tell Shridhar: Shridhar, I will buy you also a house, and this might get him to feel better. When you have a house in prospect, your heart pumps good blood. Yes, that's the trick.—Thank you for the thought," he said, and jumping across the wall, he was gone. Was I responsible for his thought? Was I responsible for Usha's birth? Was I? Was Usha responsible for Shridhar's illness? So I am the sole responsible person. Lord, where shall I go now? For I am cause.

Usha woke up in a delirium. She has been saying she wants to go to the sea. She sees big ships sail. She sees faces of men that frighten her.—"I don't want to go, Mother, I don't want to go with the Dutch," she shrieks. The mother always said to children: If you cry, I'll give you away to the Dutch, and that's why the child cried so. It must be strange to go in Dutch ships across the seas.

"The fever ran high," said Shantha to me in the evening. The fever coming, Shantha started sleeping in this house. You see Usha bought this house (though the two installments have yet to be paid—but Nadar has given his heart away to Usha) so the house is Usha's and Shantha will come, for Usha is a grown-up child, and she loves her mother, who is Shantha, for Shantha is so kind, and will not talk of the Dutch. She who does not talk of the Dutch is Mother. So, Mother is Shantha. And Shantha is round and will give Usha a brother. Will he be like Shridhar? Shantha says Shridhar is raving

all night. Ice bottles are placed on his head. Dr. N. O. Pillai is such an able doctor. He never does anything wrong. People live who live. Those that are taken away go away. Look at it in the hospital. Can you prevent what has to go? Tangamma has a difficult time. When her husband is unhappy he is angry. When he weeps he is happy. That, sir, is the law of kitten, he says in philosophic explanation. He has an explanation, as I told you, for everything. Usha is the cause of Shridhar's fever, is as simple for him as the buffalo is the mother of the grey-white calf, suckling at her udder. How mysterious life is. Does one know anything?

The doctor knows. The temperature is measured with a glass instrument that speaks. Modhu, the elder son of Govindan Nair, who is always on the football field or playing some mischief (for he wanted to be a soldier like Major-General Auchinleck) Modhu cleans the thermometer and the temperature has gone up to 105°—. Hope is just a bubble that is born in the heart. It bursts when it will. That depends on the outer air, I think. Or, it is like a bad balance? It always shows you a measure according to the ration card. The rice you eat at home belongs to another measure. Hence there is famine. Hence people die.

Famine is the cause of death. Wars are the cause of murder. Imperialism is the cause of slavery. Sri Krishna is the cause of Mahatma Gandhi. Lord, how can man be free from birth and death? Why should death come to our door?

But Shantha is all apprehensive. What if death came not to the next door but to mine—to Usha I mean. She prayed therefore there should be no death.

But I ask of you, will death come and say: May I come, sir, dear sir? What is death to a kitten that walks on the wall. Have you ever seen a kitten fall? You could fall. I could fall. But the kittens walk on the wall. They are so deft.. They are so young. They are so fresh. The mother-cat watches them. And when they are about to fall, there she is, her head in the air, and she picks you up by the scruff of your neck. You never know where she is. (Who has ever seen her? Nobody has.) If you knew where she is, you have to be the mother's mother. And how could you do that? Mother I worship you.

The bamboos were already in the courtyard. Death had come. It spoilt the nice courtyard, with flowerbeds of roses. I never went across the wall. I could hear Tangamma weep. Then Govindan Nair said something. Dr. N. O. Pillai is such an able man. He walked out of the house efficiently. It was a bad case, he said. His Gladstone bag was so knowledgeable. It contained mysterious instruments that spoke. Death is such speech? Tangamma did everything as if she were sleeping. She does not weep any more. Modhu wept profusely. He lost his brother.

Where is Shridhar gone? Where is my friend gone? Usha walked with me erect and tearless, holding my hand, to the cremation ground. It was decided to burn him though he was only seven. Usha thought it a grand thing to be burned. It made you see your heart. Father, where has Shridhar gone? —Daughter, he has gone to build a house. —Father, where shall we go? Daughter, where there is a house. —Father, what is death? —Daughter, it's like the clock-tower of the Secretariat. It chimes time. —Father, what is life? —Daughter, it is where no flame can burn. —Father, where is that? —Daughter, I do not know. Ask Govindan Nair. —Father, what is marriage? —Daughter, it is when I give you to God. —Father, when will you give me to God? —Daughter, tomorrow.

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Somehow since Shridhar died Usha stayed on with me. There must always be a kitten on the wall.

Shantha, more and more, came to live with me. The child would soon come. It will be a son. It will be a brother. Usha was going to have a brother. She told her School—now she went to the Convent School—that she was going to have a brother. They said: Where is your mother then? She said: Here. —Where do you come from then? Did you not say you came from Alwaye? —She said: Yes. That was my mother's house. This is my house. My brother will be born in my house. —And all the school girls thought: what a wonder! Can one have a little brother so easily. For he will be very beautiful.

The Belgian sisters did not speak of brother's mother. So she wondered why God made some people with speech and others who had no speech. Some only had brothers, and that is the truth, she said to herself, as she entered her arithmetic class.

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About three or four months later, at the end of September it was—no, in fact at the end of August, for the rains had not ended yet, and the Dussera not yet there,—that one morning Govindan Nair was arrested at his house. He was arrested on a charge of bribery—a yellowed and much greased document was produced to prove that from some old lady in Vulzehavannoor, three miles from Kurtarakara, he had taken a sum of rupees one hundred and nine. She had a son that ran a ration shop. It could not be more explicit, according to Police Inspector Rama Iyer. He had suddenly also grown rich, the son of this old lady. How did this happen? A den of corruption (according to police reports) was discovered. The paper in the name of Meenakihiamma, of Pottadkovil, Vulzehavannoor, was made out. She was an elderly lady of fifty-seven. She admitted having given rupees one hundred and nine to Govindan Nair. But that was for the sale of a calf, a heifer. Govindan Nair's house lay some four miles away, in Valanthoor. She knew the servant. He was taking a calf to the river. The old lady was going to have a grand-daughter. It was going to come in two days. "We must have a heifer when the child is a few months old. The present cow will dry up before long." So the heifer was bought. Also people thereabouts had a supersitition. Govindan Nair's family was called the Valavathur family (they had fought in some wars and had some vague privileges) and they had one virtue: They never touched anything that did not turn gold. Yet they died all of them in miserable circumstances. Some in distant parts and of vague fevers, others of murder or of debauchery but one and all ended badly. Only after the seventh generation would the lineage be pure again. It was a curse of one of the elders who had been allowed to die in starvation, while the others were gay with women. This generation would be the

last. The rotten chapter will be wiped off the pages of history. Man will turn innocent again.

So the arrest did not come as a surprise. The death of Shridhar was in fact like a predecessor of this fact. You know you will suffer, so suffering comes and tells you. Whether you sold a calf (or was it pneumonia?) you must play fair. If you tricked destiny, destiny tricked you. If you said: I am all right; I am almighty. I am Govindan Nair. I can weigh children in balances, make wayward women fall at my feet. Destiny chooses the exact fact for your redemption. Rama Iyer comes and takes you away to police custody. He is the mildest of Police Inspectors. But if he has a warrant of arrest, will he stop because he hears Shridhar has died some four months ago? Was the calf sold before or after? Did the said ration shop thrive before or after? The question with the law is a question of dates. If you did not murder the moment you murdered, you might never have murdered. How strange it all is. One moment before you did not commit murder. One while after you have. What happened between the two? The knife came into the picture. Yes, the knife.

For, everybody in the ration shop No. 66 knew this was all fake. First of all, a man who plays with children so,—Kunni Krishna Menon's family will bear you witness to this—could not have sold false permits. How could he starve children? If you starved mothers, you starved children. If you starved fathers, you starved mothers from having children. So, you could not starve anybody. Starvation can come only through a man that has, like the British Government, say, let others die. May I alone live. Can you live alone? I am an island. I am king, etc., etc.

For the real story of the arrest is this: One morning, it was a month or two after this house had been bought, Govindan Nair went to his office. He was a little late, being held by some friends for a smoke. Then he went in, up and in, he saw everybody so busy, their papers under their noses. He felt ashamed to be late. Fortunately there were very few people in the ration shop below, and this gave him comfort. Though there was no real connection between the ration office and the ration shop, yet somehow they worked together, like a husband and wife whose stars are different, and through



marriage and disease they go through the bamboo processional and the funeral anniversaries. Thus the two were tied together. Not finding many persons in the shop below meant the office ran well. There was no overwork. The boss was in good humour. The new ration cards had come from the printers. Besides, perhaps Velayudhan Nair, that rascal's cold is better. So he will have started verifying the ration card numbers. Sometimes the printers deliberately put two numbers together and sold the duplicate to hotel servants for ten rupees. If not, tell me how are the hotels to thrive? Once again, sir, it's a matter of starvation.

So, Govindan Nair went in, and what he saw was indeed strange to behold. In a cage, of white steel wiring, in fact in a big rat-trap was a large cat, and the cat and the cage were on his table. All his table was cleaned up. In the next room his boss was sneezing away as usual with his handkerchief in his hand—he had put too much snuff into his nose. It comes from living too near the temple, and every brahmin gives you a bit of snuff. —I wash the divine-vehicles for the Dussera festivals, and here some snuff for you. —I go to pour curry powder for the sacred viands, here's 'a pinch,' Bhoothalinga Iyer. —I am going to wash the second matin service vessels, and here's 'a sniff,' Bhoothalinga Iyer. —And so on, up to the bus stand, and there is always Viswanath Iyer who gives you some once you get in. All the office-going people get in together and snuff together, and by the time the bus has passed the overbridge and past the office, you have had three pinches. You have to wipe your front of coat to remove every trace of this dark trituration. It looks disreputable going to office with a garland of dark powder. Then you go in, and going in you see a cat in the cage. Wiping your snuff off you do not see the cat, you see the cage. Once in the office room, you hear the meow, meow. You say: John, what is it? —John the third clerk laughs and hides his face in the palm of his hand. "Abraham, Abraham," shouts Bhoothalinga Iyer. Abraham comes in. He, too, has snuff on his nose. His beard is ever like Jesus Christ's. And he says: John has played a trick on Govindan Nair. —What trick? A ration office and such tricks. —Where are the rats? —There are no rats, sir. It's a cat. —A cat, when there is no rat. But I thought I saw a



rat-trap.— Yes, sir, but the tongue taken out, and there is a cat. —For Bhoothaling Iyer rats existed and not cats. Ration shops have rats. That is true. And you must have rat traps. But this meow-meow business. Bhoothalinga Iyer was sure Govindan Nair, that clever rascal—(all Nairs have enough brahmin blood to be clever, Bhoothalinga Iyer used to say, but not enough to understand the truth. —Truth is the privilege of the brahmins.) —Yes, yes, cleverness gone elsewhere always produces these disasters. You have, for example, a cat on your table and in a rat cage.

“John!” he called.

The clerk called John came in. John had some money in the Imperial Bank. So he thought himself infallible. He said:

“Yes, sir, what is the matter?”

“What is this nonsense about the cat?”

By now Shivaraman, Syed Sahib and Muthukishna Pillay had joined him at the door.

“Yes, what is it?”

“Govindan Nair always talks of a mothercat. It carries the kitten by the scruff of its neck. That is why he is so carefree. He says, learn the way of the kitten. Then you are saved. Allow yourself to be carried by the mothercat,” said John.

Bhoothalinga Iyer was a brahmin. For him a cat, a *mar-jalam*, was a pariah animal. It was sly, unclean, unfaithful. It was evil to see it first thing in the morning. It was evil if it crossed from right to left. You could go back home and then visit the sanctuary, and beg the gods to bless you. Then you could catch the bus. Also, cats' hair, if it fell into your milk, was worse than gall. It made you vomit white blood. So altogether the cat was not a creature to be thought about. A rat, yes, it was the vehicle of Lord Ganesha himself. In every temple you could see a Ganesha and under every Ganesha there was his vehicle, the rat, like Lord Subramanya had the peacock, or the Shiva the bull. But the cat, which god rode a cat? Nobody did — so it was improper, unholy, beyond thought. What is beyond thought cannot be thought about—so it is evil to the Temple street. Evil has a name and a text. Can you speak without words? You could therefore no more

say you could say the cat was holy. Nobody, no god, rode on it. Chee, chee, sneezed Bhoothalinga Iyer, contemplating a cat.

Poocha is what a cat is called in *Malayalam*. But Bhoothalinga Iyer always used the Sanscrit word *marjalam*. It carried its own condemnation. It needed no more explanations. It made you talk less. Abraham understood. John did not.

"Take it away. Leave it on the roof or anywhere you like."

"Sir, it's a Persian cat, sir. I thought I would make a present of it to my colleague. Have you any objection, sir?"

"What objection can I have that you give a present to your colleague? Notorious are the Nairs for the mess they live in. Maybe the cat will clear the rats. Do you know his wife?"

"How would I know, sir?"

"Your wife may have known his wife?"

"Sometimes we meet at the cinema. She is a grand lady and from the Ummatham family. They are well spoken of everywhere."

"Well, so be it," he said and took out his snuff-bottle. That meant you could go. The clerks all came back to their places. They laughed into their files. Each one would look at the other, and when the cat said: meow, meow, it meant Govindan Nair would be in at any time and what fun we would have. Only Abraham was downcast. This does not forbode the good. He wanted the good spread all over the world. He was doing good distributing rice.

Then you heard the big thumping steps of Govindan Nair. He always counted two steps at a time, like he did three ration cards at a time. It saves energy and it is such fun, he said. So, he was there before they could say anything. They looked composed and silent, so very anxious about the distribution of ration cards in the state of Travancore, Northern Division.

Govindan Nair came to the cage and said: "Poochi, Poochi. You are a nice fellow. Are you a he or a she?" — The cat turned round on itself, curled its tail and showed herself a female. I am a female, it said. Govindan Nair opened the cage and taking the coat off, he starts stroking the

cat. She allowed him to do it, for he had such respect. "What a nice gift to make," he said, while unable to control. John burst out laughing, holding his belly. Meow-meow, cried the cat, and jumped on the Ummathur District desk. —Ah, Poochi, Poochi, said Govindan Nair full of tenderness. —Do not go so North, my lady. I want to build you a house. Where do you come from?—he said, stroking her. She jumped on top of the stationery almirah. Ugh, ugh, ugh, laughed Guptan Nair, the additional clerk, trying to hold his laughter in his pocket. The cat now jumped straight on to Abraham's table. The file threads were red and the tassels made them look like toys. The cat started playing. It was obviously a civilized cat. One does not see cats like this everywhere. It must come from a house with many children. Chee-chee, sneezed Bhoothalinga Iyer. The cat jumped to the ceiling and fell into the outstretched arms of Govindan Nair. John was holding his belly and laughing. His joke had worked. "There's a letter from the Ration Officer, B. Division, Kolayathur. He wants to know the number of sacks of rice sent by the goods train. Was it on this expedition the railways line was waylaid? And the seventeen sacks stolen? He is worried as to how the movement of rice came to the knowledge of the public," said John.

Putting back the cat into the cage, Govindan Nair laughed and as if he were spitting out his cigarette stump, he said: "You."

"I what?"

"Yes, you what?" This is the question," he said coming to John's table in perfect equanimity.

"I don't understand," said John, standing up.

"I am not your officer, sit down," he said, putting his hand on his colleague's shoulder.

"You have money in the Imperial Bank."

"Yes, so I have. My father left me an estate."

"My father, sir, also existed. Otherwise I would not be here. And he also had a patch of land. I also sold some bit of it. But I have no money in the bank."

"So what? I just don't understand."

"Abraham understands," he said, turning to a side. Abraham had left his work and come to help anyone in need.

"Nair!" shouted Bhoothilanga Iyer. He was a good man but he wanted obedience from his subordinates.

"Yes sir," said Govindan Nair, and going towards the boss' office. The cat was saying: meow-meow. John went over to Govindan Nair's table, and placed the cage on the floor, between the table and the almirah, well hidden away, so to say.

"Nair, who brought this cat here?"

"That is the question I wanted to ask you, sir, I wondered why cats run into such holy places," Govindan Nair knew the sensibilities of his boss.

"Why did you think this office is holy?"

"Yes sir. It is holy because we feed the starving. That which feeds the starving is holy. That which feeds the thirsty is sacred. So the Ganges is sacred. That is why we worship the cow. This shop, this office is a very *kamadehnu*<sup>10</sup>. We give what others want."

"I can't spend my morning arguing mythology with you."

"Is there anything you want done, sir?"

"Yes. Look into that Ummathur file. The seventeen sacks of rice lost from the railway wagon. The police have been here this morning. Please inquire."

"I'll look into the matter immediately and let you know."

Such matters were always entrusted to Govindan Nair. He had studied law up to the first year. He was too lazy to appear for the second year, so he became a clerk. Jobs are going at the secretariat. War jobs, said a friend. He went in and came out with an order as it were. So Govindan Nair knew a bit of law. Also as a student he was a grand speaker. And he was invited by schools for debates. That gave him a wide knowledge of Travancore. And when he married, his father-in-law was a Tahsiladar. This took the father-in-law almost everywhere. This took Tangamma everywhere. So Govindan Nair knew a great bit more of Travancore. And then he was a clever man. So these files went to him.

The Ummathur-seventeen-sacks case became a famous case. Even Madras got worried about it. Where had the sacks gone?

The office settled down to peaceful work now. The day

<sup>10</sup> A legendary cow that gave one everything one wished for.

was getting hot. The boss started calling for files. Downstairs, the balance made the usual sing-song noise. Some people spoke high. And others at tangents. It was a Saturday morning. So there were not too many people. Many of them had gone to the Kalayodhan fair. The rains would stop. The harvest ripen. And the world will yet be fair.

The cat lay upon its belly, its eyes wide and absolutely at rest. It did not say meow even once after that.

\* \* \*

Mothercat sits in a cage, between the office table and the almirah. All about the office there are thirteen clerks. And the boss Bhoothalinga Iyer sneezes from his room. His room is divided from the rest with just a swinging partition. Every time anyone goes in—for the boss calls—the cat seems to rise up. There's a painful irritating grating—the hinges have not been oiled. When the boss calls and the grating creaks, the cat sits up on her haunches, and lies down again. When Govindan Nair lifts her up, for it's a she, after all one discovered, mothercat rises up and says: meow-meow. Then Govindan Nair will give his end of pen to her and she will chew it. "Ah, she chews the origin of numbers," said Govindan Nair to whom every mystery ever seemed to open itself. If Lavoisier, as text books say, divided oxygen and hydrogen after so many years of experiments, our Govindan Nair born in France, would just have to stand and say: "Water, show thyself to me!" And hydrogen would have stood to one side somewhat big and bellied, and oxygen would have curled herself shy at his knees. —And he would not have lost his head at the Revolution. The British, too, chopped off their kings' heads. Whether a king chops off your head, or you chop off his, the police state is the police state. The fact is where the mothercat carries you across the wall and to anywhere, there is nothing but space. Space is white and large and free. Why don't you go there? "Sir,"—you will say, kneading your snuff, "but there is a wall. To which you make answer. —Like Usha, why don't you put stones one over the other, and standing under the bilva tree, you speak to Shridhar. —But then, you say:—That is why Shridhar died. Usha spoke over the

wall and the cat carried him away. Funny, sir, where a child is carried away by a cat. Anyway, tell me where is Shridhar gone? —He has gone to build a house three storeys high. Is that what you say, mothercat asks Govindan Nair. The mothercat says meow. Govindan Nair cannot keep her any longer in the cage. He opens the cage and the cat leaps on to his lap. It was a trained cat. It knew what is right from what is wrong.

Children below were playing hide and seek among the rice bags. The ration shop was also their playground. When the mothers waited, the children played among the bags. Govindan Nair himself wanted to go down and play with the children. But there was this Ummathur file and the seventeen sacks lost. Who had stolen the sacks? Was it a poor man or was it a merchant? Stroking the cat, his pen in his mouth, Govindan Nair was contemplating. When he thinks in this manner he always wants to do something mechanical. He carried a pen-knife always with him, for sharpening pencils and such other things (including rose-twigs). He usually took this out, pulled out the blade and started rubbing it up and down the edge of the table. Just where he worked, he had written—or rather carved — many names—his own, the name of his boss, and Usha's. I was surprised to find Usha's name there, but it was there. Sharpening the knife he started humming to himself. The cat on his knee was warm. Then he went over to John's table. Perhaps he just wanted to consult some file.

"John," he said, while the mothercat stood behind him.

"Yes, Mister," said John, very sure of himself.

"John, this is a cat," he said, lifting up the cat and placing it on John's table. The whole office stopped work. Even Bhoothilanga seemed involved in this silence.

"What's that?" cried Abraham and came over to John's table.

"Oh, I am only talking to him about the cat."

"What cat?" said Syed his hand on Govindan Nair's shoulder.

"Why man, cat. There's cat only. All cats belong to one species-cat. Call it cat or call it marjala which is Sanscrit or better still poochi which is Malayalam, it's the same —isn't that so, John?"

"Yes, my lord," said John rising up from his seat.

"So, gentlemen, I wanted to know how much zoology our friend knew. What is a Persian cat called in Latin? In fact, what is the Latin name for a cat?"

"Felinus," said Abraham remembering his church instructions.

"Then Felinus Persiana would be a Persian cat," said Govindan Nair, who knew of course everything.

"Yes," said Abraham dubiously.

"And man?"

"Humanus."

"And I?" he said.

"Ego."

"Make me a Latin sentence, Abraham. —Ego esse humanus malabarico et lux esse felinus persiana, or some such thing."

"I don't know that much Latin," said Abraham.

The curious thing was the boss did not call. The cat continued to raise its tail and bunch herself to be caressed. Govindan Nair still held the pen-knife in the other hand as if it were his pencil. Man must hold something with his hands, otherwise how could he know what he is about. If you carry a pen-knife like a pencil in your hand you are a clerk. Is there any doubt about it? Speaking biologically, Govindan Nair used to say, a hundred generations of clerks will produce lead from their bowels and clerks' fingers will have cavities like those in the new office pencils. You write morning, noon and night. You could even write in your dreams.

"What is clerk in Latin?"

"Clericus is Latin itself."

"Ha, ha," said Govindan Nair. Seeing the whole office around him, and the boss silent—it was a hot forenoon—he added:

"Define the cat, Mr. John."

"Mr. Govindan Nair, a cat is a feline being."

"What are its characteristics?" Govindan Nair started making a firm and rapid movement with his knife (back and forth) as if he were sharpening the pencil, on the beautiful skin of the cat.

"Its characteristics are—its characteristics are," mumbled John, and as somebody said, he had cleared his bladder audibly.



It poured an acrid smell into the room. Bhoothalinga Iyer had a bad cold, and one could hear him snuff in snuff. There was such silence in the office (but for the burring sound of Govindan Nair, who anyway always burred) that Bhoothalinga Iyer was sure everybody was at work. There was suddenly silence even in the ration shop.

"First it is of the same family as the lion," said Rama Krishna, a young clerk. He had joined duty only three months ago. He was fresh from college.

"Then?" asked Govindan Nair.

"Then," said Abraham, getting very anxious, "it goes in and out of one's house as not even a man can."

"What very intelligent colleagues I have," said Govindan Nair. "Then?"

"A cat is the purest animal in the world."

"Why so? Hey there. Syed, what does your Muslim theology say about it?"

"In Muslim theology only pigs are evil. They betrayed Muhammed. And the chameleon. But the cat is sacred."

"No. Man, I know your theology better. The cat is not sacred in Islam. It is sacred in Egypt. It was called Bastet."

"And it wore a crown?" said John a little assured all this was a joke.

Govindan Nair quickly made a paper crown, he cut the three sides of a triangle and gave it a point, and placed it on the head of the cat and he said: "Hey, Bastet, you are sacred, don't you understand?"

"And Syed what is it your people do when what is sacred is treated as what is sacred?"

"We kneel and touch the ground and ask for Allah's blessings."

"Now, Mr. John, you understand. Here is Bastet. You have brought a very god to our poor ration office. You be the priest."

"Oh, no," said John. He knew Govindan Nair had something up his mind.

"Kneel!" shouted Govindan Nair, "kneel, man!" And he brandished his knife, holding the cat firmly with his left hand. Or say: no sir, I am a low born, I am a coward. "Kneel!" he shouted. Bhoothalinga Iyer's chair creaked.



"You don't insult a cat like this, a cat in a rat cage."

John knelt devoutly.

"There, once again," shouted Govindan Nair.

John knelt again, crossing himself. Syed had his hands brought together. All the office was one knit silence.

"Kiss it," shouted Govindan Nair again.

John kissed the cat. Bhoothalinga Iyer came and stood behind the crowd. He thought some file was being tampered with.

"Govindan Nair!" he shouted.

"Yes sir." And he went toward his boss. The cat jumped down the table and everybody gave way to the cat. Rubbing against his legs it cried meow, meow. Govindan Nair lifted her up and placed her on the shoulder with one hand. His knife was still in the left hand.

"What is this?" asked Bhoothalinga Iyer.

"We've been discussing the Latin formation of Persian cat. Do you know it, sir?"

"In Sanscrit it is called marjala," he said as if he was saying with only the tip of his tongue. "And for Persian cat there's no word in ancient Sanscrit."

"In Malayalam it is called poochi-poochi," said Govindan Nair.

The cat jumped on to Bhoothalinga Iyer's table. It saw another tassel of a file and started playing with it. Bhoothalinga Iyer seeing all the eyes of the office (for everybody seemed to have come to see what was happening) wanted to shout:—Get out! Get away! But his tongue would not say it. How can you say with what is not what is? How can you shape words that cannot come from yourself? What do you do if you find yourself a prisoner? You want to escape. Govindan Nair laid the knife on the table, and said to Bhoothalinga Iyer,—Sir, tell me a story.

"What story?"

"Any story."

"I know no story."

"I'll tell you a story," said Govindan Nair and lifted the cat and placed her on the shoulders.

"Once upon a time," he began, and before he could go forward the cat jumped on to Bhoothalinga Iyer's head. Bhoothalinga Iyer opened his eyes wide and said, Shiva, Shiva, and

he was dead. He actually sat in his chair as if he could not be moved.

Govindan Nair rushed back home with the beautiful Persian cat in the cage and let it loose in the house. Then it was he went to Bhoothalinga Iyer's funeral. His wife Lakshamma was moved, deeply moved with all the consoling words Govindan Nair spoke to her. He spoke of death and birth and such other things. He too was weeping. His boss had died. Bhoothalinga Iyer had asthma trouble. And asthmatics have a weak heart. And the snuff did not help, did it—said the brahmins at the door of the temple.

Everybody somehow came to console Govindan Nair at his office as if he had lost something. Kunni Krishna Menon from the next house came and spoke as if Govindan Nair needed condolence. Perhaps he would be promoted to his boss' place was also a rumour. Then he could not run down and play with the children, remarked Abraham. An officer cannot do it. —“Then you be boss, Abraham,” said Govindan Nair hugging him.

\* \* \*

With two deaths within forty days Govindan Nair moved about in a bemazed state. He loved Bhoothalinga Iyer, and true it's the cat that jumped on his head (but who brought in the cat, John of course). One had no business to be asthmatic. And so the boss died. Usha talked across the wall to Shridhar, and he died. True you call it pneumonia. (Dr. N. O. Nair said so, but Shridhar died.) So Govindan Nair made Abraham the chief, and had him so nominated. He preferred, did Govindan Nair, to be clerk. People said this and that, and they said thus Govindan Nair can go on building houses. A boss cannot do it. Govindan Nair said, to be a boss one has to be asthmatic or diabetic. And everybody laughed. For Abraham could not live without insulin. And Abraham was withal an able officer.

He bought himself a new (second-hand) bicycle, a green B.S.A., and when he came to office he looked like a padre going to his flock.

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Abraham's strength was that he was a good man. If good men did not run ration offices who should? This was the argument of Govindan Nair. We should not all become British agents. So Bhoothalinga Iyer's widow was given rice as if Bhoothalinga Iyer were still alive. Where after all could the poor man have gone, with the scarf on his head (tied light like a turban) and his perpetual cold because of snuff, and his love for service regulations, Section No. 345 of the Travancore Civil Service rules, etc. Yet he did not die a gazetted officer. He might have lived.

Ration cards for orphans and such others were not looked into too carefully. You gave for him who wanted it. The rascals were there for the rest. Someone will always build a spire to a temple to expiate his sins. Man has a heart white as a rice pod but he makes it dark as a lentil pod, for he thinks the world is a balance, and the master weigher is not Abraham. Lord save us from our sins. Lord, may rice be rice, and lentil lentil. That is the secret of the world. You want to make the rice lentil. Botanists will tell you, rice is *Oryza Sativa* and lentil *lens esculenta*. How can the sativa become esculenta? How can two ever become one? Find the secret and you need no gold to seek happiness.

Govindan Nair brought back the cat and gave it to me. Somehow he thought I would look after it well — I look after a cat? Ask Saroja and she will tell you. Govindan Nair says don't ask Saroja, ask Shantha, and Shantha says I love cats. Do I? If anyone tells you, you are a rascal, can you prove that you are not? How do you know? What do you really know? Can a rascal see his rascalry? How could he, poor man. So, if Shantha says I love cats she must be right. After all she is seven months pregnant and she must know it better than I. They say pregnant women are holy. They have second sight. Does Shantha think she is holy? No. She thinks me holy. Does Usha think I am what I am? She thinks I am her father. How do I know I am her father? Because she tells me so. Because Saroja said: This is your child — when I went back on leave two months after the child's birth. This is your child, she said.. She must know. Who knows anyway? Knowledge alone knows. So, how shall I ever know if I love cats?

I must know cats and I must know that I know that I love cats. When cats are there, where am I? When I am there, what becomes of the cats? It is not easy, Shantha, to say I love cats. But she protests, Govindan Nair says you love cats. That is why he had the wall cut just where the stones stood that Usha could speak to Shridhar. When you can walk to the next garden with the cat, you can say I love cats. Can you not say I love I? —No, Shantha, I love you.—Shantha says: Good it is I am an Hindu woman and you are my lord. If I were not that, but one of those big-bosomed women of the European films, smoking and kissing in public, I would not say yes to you all the time. I would say no.—Then what is it you want to say, you my Hindu wife? —I say, to say I love you is to say love myself. Who said so, Shantha?— Sage Yagnayavalkya said so. — I now understand. Yes, I love Shantha because she has my child in her. That is the secret? She has myself in her.

The cat came in and pawed the rug on the floor. The cat was not pleased with something.—What is it doing, Shantha? I asked. She said: It is asking for its mate. — Where shall we find a mate for him, Shantha? —He knows himself where it is to be found. He knows the self. So he is the self.

Shantha was always mysterious. Just as Saroja was always clear. Shantha always says two things at the same time. No wonder she and Govindan Nair liked each other so much. She says: How can anything mean one and one thing? Look at that bilva tree. It's a bilva tree all right. But were there no light, would it be a bilva tree? So you say it's a bilva tree means there is the tree and the light that makes it the tree.— If I touch you, Shantha, there is no light in that. —She said: I can see you have never been across the wall. For there you could touch me and see you touch me. —What, what's special about that? —The speciality is that it is not special. You think because I bear a child I am special. Very, very special my lord. —Yes, you are.— But, you know as I teach in my school, all that is born had a mother. The father is not always so clear. Look at the bees and the flowers. —So, the mother is necessary for all children. So, motherhood has nothing special. And what about fatherhood, Shan-

tha? — Don't you go on teasing me. Show me the proof of your fatherhood. You have a belly small as a cucumber, — she said and laughed. —Yes, that is true. Where is the proof of my fatherhood? — She said: Yes, there is.— Where is it, Shantha? — I am your proof. You are only seen by me. Who could know you as I know you? So, the proof of my lord is me. The proof became concrete and became the child. I must know I am. You say I am. —Who says I am, Shantha? Nobody, and that is your proof. Only I say you. And you say I. That is the proof of proof, she said and became very silent.

That's always the difficulty with Shantha. She can speak true. She always speaks in puzzles. And when I ask her why, she says woman is the biggest puzzle. Is that a proof of proof? No.

So, I was saying Govindan Nair brought the cat and left it with me.

Two months later Shantha gave birth to a lovely child. We said we'll call him Krishna from the moment he was seen. He was so blue, and her father was called Krishnan Pillai. She loved her father, so she loved me. I loved the child, so the child loved her. The father did he love me? Poor man he was dead and so long ago. Was he born as the child to love me? Who knows? Shantha's mother said our Krishna looked just like his grandfather. After all you see what your eyes see. That is the root of the problem, said Shantha.

I should be happy with the child, with Usha who had returned to me after the Christmas holidays with her mother, and the cat. But I can never be happy. How can you know you are an Indian? You must know India. If I am to be happy I must know happiness. What is happiness?

Govindan Nair's definition is, of course, simple: The mind that is not when the cat carries the kitten, that is happiness. That's not very clear. It is just like saying, my nose is that which I catch by carrying my hand behind my head and turning round quickly to hold a facial projection, which could be called my olfactory organ. Strange, such round-about definitions. Man, do two and two make four or not?

—First tell me what two is, and I shall answer the rest,

he said and laughed and laughed. —You is one. I is one. Where is the two? he asked. I heard the baby cry, so I went to give the feeding bottle to the baby. And I sang a song and sent the baby to sleep:

Jo, jo push the cradle, jo  
 push the cradle of Sri Rama,  
 push the cradle of Victorious Rama,  
 push the cradle of Sita's Lord, Rama,  
 push the cradle, jo.

\* \* \*

I sing of man because he is my neighbour. After all one's big neighbour is oneself. The neighbour's neighbour is always the Self. I speak of the cat and the wall which make the world I live by. Usha is my daughter, and she has a bad cold and she is laid up. Shantha's child is two months old, and we've given him no name. Call him man, Mister, says Govindan Nair. For him, nothing is particular, a chair means all chairs, a knife means all knives, a clerk means all the clerks that go on bicycles to offices, sneezing and wheezing like Abraham. Even a bicycle for him means only a B.S.A. Shall I call my son man? I have made a secret vow. If Govindan Nair is acquitted (for alas, he was arrested by Rama Iyer, not on a charge of homicide, which would have been legitimate, but on a charge of bribery with the 109 rupees document, etc.) I'll call him Govinda, Govinda, but from the way Govindan Nair laughs and teases Rama Iyer one knows the case is lost. As I told you, Govindan Nair had passed his first year in law. Besides, he was born as it were for argument. He could never see anything except in definition of its situation. If I said, for example, the bilva tree, his mind would not think of Shiva and the hunter, as it would to you and to me, but he would think of the manure the tree must have had (rotten banana leaves, of course) and of the man who planted it and was it morning or evening when it was planted. The man who had planted it became so important that I tease him often and said the father is more important than the son. Yes, he said, that is so. The kitten is held at the scruff of the neck by the cat. Who is more important, sir? How can you argue against that?

In fact I used to send food to Govindan Nair at the Central Jail. He said: When you were ill I sent you food (and Shridhar came to you) and now I am ill (for what is jail but a social illness!?) you send me food, and Usha. —The face of Usha made Govindan Nair happier than anything on earth. He was convinced Usha was Shantha's child. That was again the way with him. If he saw black and found it brown, he could prove it was brown because he only saw brown. His argument was so simple: Do you see seeing first, or do you just see? If I have drunk a glass of coffee with milk and as in fact I have not, but believe I have, which is more real, my exhilaration or the coffee that was drunk? Proof is only oneself. Proof simply means I know. — So brown is brown. Don't you believe you exist, even though you know you will die? How do you say that, Mister? When you know this rotten fat thing, with pus and blood excreta, with semen for procreation, and bile for digestion, with the five breaths and the nine supports (dhatus) and the blood that oozes to the heart and the dirt that is thrown out — this filthy sack of the five elements, what does it become? It stinks, sir, it stinks when it is laid on fire. Not only it stinks, but as in the case of Bhoothalinga Iyer it sits up suddenly in the middle of its end, it sits up, and one would think it is going to shout an order — Hey there (sneeze, sneeze, two sneezes are good) — Hey there, bring me the Ummathur file and the seventeen sacks of rice gone — and yet it's a half corrupt, half burned thing purring with many fluids. Chee, chee. This body. And this mind, with its encaged gramophone record, another His Master's Voice, and all it needs is a white dog listening to its music. Yes, that's the mystery, sir. The dog listens to this mechanical music. Hey, ho, you say.

I see waterports,

Going to the Ganges, my love

I see my maid going to

The morning of marriage, etc., etc.

and you hear the gramophone. The only difference is not only you have to change the record. You have to change the needle, too. But whether you sing a cinema song or you sing a hymn to Shiva, the box is just the same, only the needle talks to the



record. Who made the record? Eventually you made it, for you go to buy it, and he who sells it made it because you will buy it, and he who sings knew there would be a buyer, so you are the cause of the song. Now sing man,

I am empty as a tamarind seed

The lord plays the square and four with me.

That is right. When you know you are empty as a tamarind seed, you said it and say it again, you know the tamarind seed is empty. And begin to think of the play. And where play begins, reality begins. Reality is only where you go to prison and say, close the door and open the door. Any door can open and any door can close. What is special about a prison door that you call it a prison door? In dream you must have gone to a house from which you could not escape. The staircase fell off and the upper wall had gone somewhere. On waking up, do you say, I am falling, I am falling. You say I played in the dream. You go to the office and go up the staircase with the ration shop below (and its huge balance) and you put your coat down and sharpen your pencil and say: —Let me look into the Ummathur file. Then, suddenly, you remember in the dream, Bhoothalinga Iyer was saying: I say I missed my train to Coimbatore. What shall I do? — Did he miss his train to Coimbatore? Is that what he wanted to say on getting up and sitting on his pyre? Where has he gone? Where has Bhoothalinga Iyer gone? Lord, do you know, etc, etc.

There is no argument against a man like Govindan Nair who will bring a staircase from his dream to prove that Bhoothalinga Iyer has gone to Coimbatore. His further argument is: Prove to me that Bhoothalinga Iyer is not in Coimbatore.

You may say he is talking nonsense. No sir, he is talking sense. You never saw a man talk more sense than Govindan Nair. Even Usha says she can understand him. I cannot. Shantha could and the cat seemed to understand. But I read too much *The Hindu*. That is the trouble with me, and I cannot understand. What can *Malayalarajayam* say, except what its correspondents had seen. But Govindan Nair talks of only what he sees. And that is the secret of his argument.

The white-clad judge, Mr. Avadhana Pillay said in the



palace-like court, by the railway line, that every advocate knows so well — the board of the advocates looks like cocoanuts on a tree, there may be so many in the street opposite, — Vishwanatha Iyer, B. Sc., LL. B. Ramanujan Iyengar, M.A.M.L. Advocate High Court. Mr. Syed Mohammed Sahib, Advocate, P. Gangadharan Pillai High Court Advocate, S. Rajaram Iyer, Advocate, etc., etc.,) — the judge said: I cannot follow your argument, sir. Will you repeat.

“Mr. Bhoothalinga Iyer, of blessed memory”, started Govindan Nair, “used to visit certain places whose names is not mentioned in respectable places.” (Ho, Oho,” shouted one or two persons in the gallery.) “If I do not mention the name, it is because many persons whose faees I see now, come there.”

“My Lord, such insinuations are not to be permitted in open Court.”

“The sun shines on the good and on the wicked equally, like justice. Please go and close the sunshine before you say: this should not be discussed in open Court.”

“The Court, Accused, is free to do what it likes.”

“I was only saying; whether you close the door and sit like photographers in the dark room or you come out, the sun is always open. The Maharaja of Travancore, Sir.”

“Say His Highness.”

“Yes, His Highness, the Maharaja of Travancore is there, whether his subjects — say some fellow in the hill tribes — knows his name or not.”

“So?”

“So, what is real, alone is.”

“That is so plain.”

“Yes, but we never want to see it. For example that a worthy man like Bhoothalinga Iyer (of blessed memory) used to visit places of little respectability.”

“So?”

“So, he met there, one day, a lady of great respectability.”

“Your statements are so contradictory.”

“Your lordship, could I say your Lordship, without the idea of an Accused? Could I say respectable without the idea of disrespectable coming into it? Without saying: I am not a woman, what does the word man mean?”

"Yes, let us get back to Bhoothalinga Iyer."

"Mr. Iyer used to visit such a place."

"And then?"

"One day after visiting such a place, he met me at the door."

"Yes, go on. Did you?"

"Of course. I went there regularly. My wife will tell it to you."

"Oho," said the Government Advocate.

"And at the door he said: I say, every time I commit a sin, I place a rupee in the sanctuary. I tell my wife it is to go to Benares one day. But it is tightly fixed with sealing wax. There is in this place a respectable woman. When I went in, as usual, this time a new woman, a brahmin woman, I think an Iyengar Woman, came. She said her husband was dead. I knew I was going to die soon being old. But I was in a hurry. So I told her: do not worry, lady. I will go and tell your husband everything. He will understand. —She became naked and fell on the bed. Her breasts were so lovely."

"This is sheer pornography," said an elderly advocate with a big nose.

"I am quoting evidence, sir," continued Govindan Nair.

"Yes, that is so," said the judge. He seemed to like Govindan Nair somehow.

"And she played with her necklace that lay coily on her bosom."

"And what did he do?" asked a counsel for the Government.

"He did nothing."

"Ha, ha, ha," laughed many of the advocates.

"The dignity of the Court demands better behaviour," said the Government advocate. He had never had to argue against so strange a man. He got terrifically interested in his opponent.

"He not only did nothing, sir, Mr. Bhoothalinga Iyer was a man of such a generous heart."

"To propose immorality as a generous thing," said Advocate Tirumalachar.

"What do advocates defend?" asked the judge.

"Morality," said Tirumalachar, adjusting his turban.

"We defend the world," said the Government Advocate.

"But law says we defend the Truth."

"The Government Advocate has said the right thing. Now, Accused, continue."

"Sir, my lord, I was saying: One day after the whole office was empty and Bhoothalinga Iyer was alone, he said: Govindan Nair, stay there. I have a job for you. —And he produced the Benares pot that he had hidden deeply in the sample rice sack. There was one always in the office. Who would look into it? So he produced the Benares pot and said: Go to the Mutthalinga Nayak street and on to the third house right by the temple Mantap there must be a widow called Maanakshiamma. Please hand over this one hundred and nine rupees. That is all there is in it. I told my wife yesterday to go to the cinema with my son-in-law. She went. I stole this and came here. I had the key here. I opened it. Today I have sent her again to the zoo with my son-in-law. Then there is Pattamals music at the Victrola Jubilee Hall. So, they will come late. I must return home quick. I know you are a man with a big heart. So please do this piece of service for me. She will wait for you.

"In English you call this a cock and bull story," said Tirumalachar.

"You could if you so want, call it a hen and heifer story," said Govindan Nair and laughed. He always used such puns. You never knew how to get out of it all.

"Who, sir, then was the witness?"

"As one should in such a cock and bull story, a cat," said Govindan Nair seriously. The judge rose and called the Court to dismiss. He called the Accused, and said: Please speak the truth. And Govindan Nair, with tears running down his eyes said: Your Lordship, I speak only the truth. If the world of man does not conform to truth, should truth suffer for that sake? If only you know how I pray to myself every night that I be only the truth. The judge can give a judgment. The Government Advocate can accuse. Police Inspector Rama Iyer can muster evidence. But the Accused alone knows the truth.

"How right you are," said the judge, flabbergasted.

"Tell me then, Mr. Govindan Nair, how can a judge know the truth?"

"By being it," said Govindan Nair as if it was such a simple affair. After all he had cut a passage in the wall where Shridhar used to talk to Usha. After all who can say Bhoothalinga Iyer had not gone to Coimbatore. Only Abraham could not, for he would lose his job (and with it his green B.S.A. bicycle), if the boss returned. Suppose Shantha's child were really Bhoothalinga Iyer reborn? Who would know? The cat could, was Govindan Nair's conviction.

"Tomorrow I'll bring the cat to the Court," he said, as if asking the judge permission. Of course what wrong could Govindan Nair have done? Could you ever see a man so innocent? Anybody could see he played with children and the balance. And when one side was heavy, he put two kids on the other side to make the balance go up. Then he brought the needle to a standstill, holding it tight. Thus balance was created among men.

"The cat, sir, will do it," he said. The judge agreed.

Next day I sent Usha with Shantha (the child was left at home with Tangamma to look after it.) The cat was carried back in a big cage.

When the Court was deliberating openly, the Government Advocate said: "My Lord, we are facing judgment against judgment. We must be careful. Can a cat be witness in any case?"

"Why not? We are in Travancore."

"I thought so too, Your Lordship. Why should we follow the proceedings of any other Court of the world, were it His Majesty's Privy Council in London. If a cat could be proved to prove any evidence we might set up a precedent."

"My Lord," said Govindan Nair, rising. Crowds had gathered at the court house. Such a thing had never happened before. It was not even a political case. (There was no Gandhi in it.) Women were somehow convinced Govindan Nair was an innocent man. Some of them had seen him in the ration shop. Others had gone to have ration cards issued. Some had noticed him give way to ladies when the bus was overcrowded. Such things are never forgotten by women. They always feed the child in their womb whether the child

be there or not. Who knows, someday.—

“My Lord, I am not sure this copy of my signature is correct. Could I have the original.”

“The original is in the files,” said the court clerk. “How could it be wrong?”

The cat escaped from Shantha's hand and ran all over the Court. Nobody wanted either to stop or to laugh. Both would mean the cat was there. It went right over to the Government Advocate and sat in front of him as if it were going to accuse the accuser. The silence was so clear, one could see the movement of the cat's whiskers. There was no doubt the cat was there. And it knew everything. The cat then suddenly jumped on to the judge's table. And before the attendants could brush it away, it jumped down the table and fell over one of those huge clay inkpots in which they keep ink in offices, and turning through the back door, went in. The court clerk was looking at the file. The cat did nothing. It stood there. The attendants came and stood watching the cat. The cat simply lay on the floor doing nothing. Govindan Nair was burring something in the Court. The attendants, seeing the cat doing nothing, went back to the Court.

The cat suddenly jumped on to the shoulder of the clerk and started licking his neck. He felt such sweetness in this, he opened file after file. The cat now jumped over to the table and sat. Usha came from the back, led by an attendant, and took the cat in her arms. The clerk had indeed found the paper.

“May I see it, Your Lordship?” asked Govindan Nair.

“Yes, here it is,” said the judge, but at the last moment he held it back. Just as he was handing the paper over, the light from the ceiling—a sun beam, in fact—pierced through the paper, or may be it was just electric light. Underneath the signature was another signature. When the judge had read it, he handed it over to the Government Advocate. He read it and said: Bhoothalinga Iyer himself has signed this. How did this happen?”

“Yes sir. That is how it was. Rama Iyer made a slight mistake. After all Bhoothalinga Iyer and he are both brahmins. He wanted to save Bhoothalinga Iyer. It is plain as

plain could be."

"Then why did you admit all that you have admitted?"

"Sir, why do we admit then that a chair is a chair?"

"Why, have you not seen a chair?"

"Ho, ho!" shouted the crowd.

"Has any one seen a chair?" asked the judge.

"Nobody has," said the Government Advocate. He was plainly taking sides with the Accused.

The judge said: "I sit on a chair."

"Who?" said Govindan Nair.

The judge in fact rose up to see who sat on the chair. He went round and round the table looking at who? There was such silence, the women wept. The cat jumped on to the dais. The attendants said nothing. The Government Advocate in fact was chatting happily with Govindan Nair. Who said there was a case? The clerk was looking for the file to put back the paper. Usha put a garland around the neck of Govindan Nair. That was the fact. Govindan Nair was not set free. He was free. Nobody is a criminal who has not been proven criminal. The judge had to find himself. And in so doing, he lost his seat. Who sits on the Judge's seat became an important subject of discussion in Travancore High Court. It was all due to Govindan Nair. He had, while in prison, written out a whole story to himself. Bhoothalinga Iyer had signed the paper. It had nothing to do with ration permits. It had to do with Bhoothalinga Iyer's extra-marital propensities. In this business he came across virtue. So, instead of going to Benares he gave the money to the widow of a brahmin, an Iyengar woman in fact. (The breasts and other things were added to make the story comply with film stories.) The story came true as he wrote it. He was sure that it was a fact. He told himself again and again and went to Court again and again. The prison wardens were so surprised to see him talking to himself. In fact he not only addressed the Court that way. He even made the necessary gestures. People could think he was practising acting. He recited his prose so precisely that he knew every situation by heart. That is why he was so so cocksure. After all, only a story that you write yourself from nowhere could be perfect. You can do with it what you want to do with it. (Abraham wrote poetry

and he said it did with him what he wanted. So, eventually, he married Myriam, etc.) But Govindan Nair had the liberty the judge did not have. Nor did the Government Advocate have it. A fact is a prisoner. You are free, or you become the prisoner, and the fact is free, etc., etc. So the Government Advocate knew the Accused was no Accused. He was his accomplice. That showed why the cat went to the Government Advocate first. The cat also kissed the clerk on the neck. Bhoothalinga Iyer's signature was revealed by sun-beam. Was Bhoothalinga Iyer then in Coimbatore?

The judge had only — his name was Mr. Justice Gopala Menon, he was the son of the late Pashkar Rao Bahadur Parameshwara Menon—and he had only three months of service before retirement. He took leave preparatory to retirement and went to the Himalayas, so people said. Govindan Nair laughed and said: You no more find the truth in the Himalayas than you find it in the *Indian Law Register*. You may find it on your garden wall and not know it was it. You must have eyes to see, he said desperately to me.

"What do eyes see?" I asked, as if in fun.

"Light," he said, tears trickling down his dark brown eyes.

You only see what you want to see. But you must see what you see. Freedom is only that you see that you see what you see.

Normally the story should have stopped there. But is life normal? Is the cat in the Court normal? Are big breasts and a necklace rising and falling to the feet of a ration clerk normal? Is death normal? Is Shantha's life with me normal (she not married to me and such a wife)? And Saroja such a married spouse (and living far away where the Dutch once landed, those able-bodied men) and she keeping Vithal and telling him: Your father is no father. Your real father is the sun. Worship him. —And when he falls and rises in prostration (every morning) Vithal finds a box of peppermints—round as the sun. This is to prove his paternity. Are the wars normal? Hitler smashing the British in Libya? Are the Japanese normal, those (semi-divine) semi-human beings, who seeing their Emperor not, die for him. —Smash aeroplanes against British warships, walk through Burmese jungles on



famine rations and defeat the well-fed British, for the Japanese have an Emperor whom no one ever sees. What then is normal? My new baby is normal. He feeds on his mother's breasts and for the rest he sleeps or cries. Usha looks after him as if it were her own child.

A child for a woman is always her own child. All children belong to her by right. Who made the world thus? I say you made it. Whoever said it was made, made it. Otherwise how can you say it was made? Making itself is an idea born of the world. So making sought making in making, and said world. World said world, and so making came into existence. Is one the proof of the other? Are you my proof, I ask of you whoever you may be? Suppose I were to take you to a lonely island and say, coo. The whole island will say coo. Then you say the whole island says coo, forgetting that you said coo. And when you said who said coo, you seek your breath and you know breath said coo. Did you see the origin of your breath? And did you see him who say you breathe, etc., etc.? It is not so simple as all that. No question is simple. So no answer is normal. Yet must I have stopped where I left off? But I must give you other news. I must prove the world is. For Love is where happening happens in non-happening. What can happen where everything is, etc., etc.?

To prove the world is, I built a house two storeys high. To speak the truth, Shantha's land was sold for eighteen thousand rupees. (The Revenue Board at last gave its decision soon after our child was born). She paid some of her mother's debts and she and her mother shifted to my house completely. We paid to Nadar (who comes every Friday to see Usha and takes her to his wife, from where the child returns rich in gifts of sweets and dolls and many choli-pieces) the second installment. As regards the third, we waited for Govindan Nair to come out of jail. He sent word privately that we should not worry. Anyway, Nadar was so kind to us, a month or two would make no difference to him. Thus, with the little money Shantha still had—we started the second storey. Were it only one room and large veranda, it would still do. We just wanted a little more sea air. From the upper terrace we look over the cocoanut trees (and actually see some eagles' nests) and

far away we see the white of the sea. When the Maharaja goes on his Arath procession in the full September evening far away we can see the elephants and the horse, though we can never guess where the sword will be dipped in the sea and the brahmins bathe. But when night falls and the procession returns, how beautiful it looks, the clusters of linked lights moving back to the temple, and then the temple lights glow. This time I said to Usha: How can we leave Shantha and the child, we shall see the Arath from here. —Usha said, of course, and Tangamma came and stood on our terrace. Modhu, her eldest born and Govindan Nair had gone for the procession. The cat sat on the edge of the new terrace and saw the procession go to the sea.

The cat has become somewhat of a problem to us. It feeds only on white cows milk, not even cows milk will do. Govindan Nair says there are some chemical processes in white cows which are not to be found in black cows, that is why Narayan Pillay Vidayan always says: Take this trituration, sister. And after that you must drink white cows milk: —Strange these limitations man puts on himself. However, there it is, the cat seems to understand it better. If Shantha is in her 'three days', and she should by chance touch the white saucer of milk the cat will not come anywhere near it. If I ever get angry with the cat, it does not get angry with me. But will beg me milk. Thus it shows what a fool I am. How can you get angry with such a silent thing? Have you ever seen it prick or tear? No, never. Usha can lie by the cat as the child lies by her, and nothing ever happens, not even a scratch on the nose. Sometimes the cat disappears and one does not see it for a long time. Nadar, who loves cats, says it goes on its *swarnamvara*<sup>11)</sup> rounds. It must seek its mate. But nobody has ever seen our cat meow on the terrace and call for a mate. Then one day it appears on the wall. We never ask it where it has been. It goes back to its white-cows milk (and the saucer) as if it had never been anywhere. Mysterious are feline ways.

<sup>11)</sup> An ancient Hindu custom of choosing the bridegroom from an assembly of pretenders.

Mysterious. you could say, are man's ways, too. He goes shopping or barking as he likes. I say barking for Govindan Nair's shout looks so much like a bark sometimes. He must speak to tree and mongoose as if they were under him. Everything in the world seemed to obey—or must obey—Govindan Nair. I sometimes wonder what would, say, the river Parrar do, if he said: Turn this way and go to the Coromandel sea. It might become a Coromandel river. He still comes and says many things I begin to understand. Shantha says in the evenings: "What a strange man. He seems wanting to devour the whole world with fire. Then he sits down and talks to you as if he were sending a child to sleep. Who is he?" —Who, indeed; is Govindan Nair? He says he is a Nair and all Nair land has floated down to Antarctica. They keep a record there perhaps. But here, what do we know? He has bought himself a bicycle, too. He gave us the seven thousand more a few months after he came out of jail. We gave it to Nadar. He refused the whole sum but took four thousand. For the other three thousand, he had a gold belt and two diamond earrings made for Usha. He gave a nosering for Shantha. (Rather, his wife came home and with betel leaf and nut, and this was given). Shantha looks so lovely with her straight nose, her fine hair and her diamond nosering.

A third storey was what I wanted to build, so that I could see up to the end of the sea. Govindan Nair laughed and said: "Mister, can you see the back of your head?"—I said no. To see the end of the sea is just like saying: I see the end of your nose. Can one see the end of my nose? Have a good look at it. Can you see it there? Just there. Yes, just here. Can you see it?—he asked. I said: No, how can I see a point?—Then how can you see the sea? he asked. The drop makes the ocean, is an ancient saying. —So, what shall I see when I build a house three storeys high? I said. He said: The day that it is finished you will die. I have your horoscope. It is all drawn up. Jupiter enters the seventh house, and with moon in the fifth, death is certain. —The cat jumped on to my lap and sat in comfort, her head held high.

The fact is I dream of a house three storeys high. Shantha says: Why be so ambitious? Why not be satisfied seeing

the Arath from our roof, and vaguely perceive the Maharaja dipping the sword into the sea? You can count the tiers of the temple spire, too.

I was not satisfied. But one day the cat came back. She had a hollowed belly. What Nadar said must have been true. Where can cats go but in search of a mate (or of rats, but this one was not like that. We never knew where the litter was. She had hidden them somewhere for we could see the teats were out. We never heard the kittens. One day, however, on the wall was a series of four (or was it five or six) kittens. They were all going. She carried each one from one spot to the other, lifted them by the scruff of the neck. They neither meowed, nor did they speak. One by one she took them down the wall. That was the first time I went across the wall. I found a garden all so rosy and gentle. There were bowers here and many sweet-smelling herbs, there were pools here and many orchids that smelled from a distance. There were many old men there with beards as long as their knees, and they talked to no one. Some were in green turbans and others, men and women, sang or danced to no tune but to the tune of trees. Snakes lived there in plenty, and the mongoose roamed all about the garden. I had never beheld such a place. I saw deer, too. How is it I never knew my neighbouring wall went up and down the road, and up again towards the hospital and came back by the bazaar and down towards the secretariat and back again, covering such a large area as if I could never have seen where it began and where it ended. I had met some of the people in it, that man there is in charge of the temple jewels. This man has a small watch shop in Putten Chantai. This is a lawyer of big repute and that other was once premier. Only the school children I recognize well, for I meet them with Usha (when I sometimes go to fetch her from her school.) How is it, I never saw the others anywhere or when I saw them I knew not they were here, across the wall? The fact of the fact is I was too lazy to know who lived there. In fact if Govindan Nair did not come (and with the British-bubo and Shridhar the two houses almost became one,) I should never have gone beyond my *Makayalarajayam* and the Government secretariat, with *The Hindu* for the evening tea. There would not have been even

Shantha (who came to me because she loved the way I and Govindan Nair talked). Truth is such a beautiful thing,—a beautiful woman like Shantha loves to hear the truth talked, because it explained her beauty and took away her responsibility. Lord, how can anyone bear the burden of beauty?

So that day I walked behind the cat. It came down the kitchen and left the litter in the corner of the granary room. Then it went up a series of stone steps. Up and up it went, up the staircase. Everybody bowed as if awed. Then I, too, followed it. This time I would not be defeated. I must win, I said. The winning was easy, for I heard such a very lovely music. I was breathless. The staircase suddenly turned, and in went the cat. I stood there white as marble. I looked in and saw everything.

I saw nose (not the nose) and eyes seeing eyes seeing, I saw ears curved to make sound visible, and face and limbs absolute rising in perfection of perfection, for form was it. I saw love yet knew not its name but heard it as sound, I saw truth not as fact but as ignition. I could walk into fire and be cool, I could sing and be silent, I could hold myself and yet not be there. I saw feet. It made flowers on stems and the curved hands of children. I smelled a breath that was of nowhere but rising in my nostrils sank back into me, and found death was at my door. I woke up and found death had passed by, telling me I had no business to be there. Then where was I? Death said it had died. I had killed death. When you see death as death, you kill it. When you say: I am so and so, and you say I am such and such, you have killed yourself. I remain over, having killed myself. This was what Govindan Nair meant. This is what Usha meant when she said she saw Shridhar. She did not really, but when she went up, she saw herself and called herself Shridhar. Now I understand. This is also why Govindan Nair never went to prison. When you saw the stone of the wall, and stone alone remained, you have no prison. If I say you are and just see you, you are not there. If I go on seeing a point, I become a point. So, the prison vanished. And I understood the ration shop balance, where children played. You weigh only that which you seem to weigh, but that which knows neither balance nor weight, it

stands outside of time. Life is so precious. I ask you why does not one play?

I play now building my house of two storeys, I change the beams of black wood to those of teak (people say like this white ants don't worm them out.)<sup>11</sup> I have a flush on the other floor up so that Usha need not come down during the night. —Doctors say the evacuating habits of children form their character later. Besides, Shantha and I love each other so much. Sometimes she wants to wash because she wants to love even more. How I love the smell of Shantha's body, it's like the inner curve of a jackfruit — pouch and honey of wondrous odours and sweetness. O how beautiful the earth is. The cat's litter is at my door. Now that Govindan Nair is transferred to Alwaye, I have my responsibilities. I go on distributing kittens. I gave one the other day to Bhoothalinga Iyer's widow. John has gone off to the wars, soon after the knife incident he joined the Navy. The battle of Burma was just beginning. His wife, however, came and said: Sir, I hear you have a cat that has wonderful kittens. Could you give me one? My husband was a friend of Govindan Nair. I gave her a cup of tea, some cakes, and one white kitten. (Mrs. John was called Anita.) The Iyengar lady with big breasts and all that: She also comes. She plays with the cat (and with Usha when she is free) and goes away. She says her house is too small and she has no place for a cat yet. If Govindan Nair were there, he would have managed her a house. In the brahmin streets near the temple there are such lovely dilapidated structures. You must buy any of them and build them anew. It will fetch pure gold, after the war. Sir C.P.<sup>12</sup> will go and Gandhi-raj will come. In Gandhi-raj everybody will have a house.

I will never build a house three storeys high. Have you ever seen a house so high? No, not in Trivandrum. In Trivandrum, the best houses, those of P. Velayudhan Nair or of Jagadish Iyer retired High Court judge or even of Raja Raja Pajendra Varma (His Highness' first cousin), are but two storeys high. You can make nice curved stairways. You could make it in marble, or in polished wood (like in the Royal Guest

<sup>12</sup> Sir C. P. Ramaswamy Iyer, the very unpopular Dewan of Travancore.

House at Kanyakumari). But you must always have the terrace open. That is what one calls the third floor. A house always opens into openness. Has anybody seen a house shut out?

I have been made Secretary of the Temple-grants Department at the Revenue Board. From five secretaries they made eight, because of the serious strain of war work. I never see my son Vithal—his mother keeps him away, because like this her lands will not become mine. Shantha never grumbles and says, I want to marry you. How could one not be married in marriage when you move where there is no movement. you sleep where there is but light? Marriage is not a fact, it is a state. You marry because you see.

I now go morning and evening through the path in the wall where Usha spoke to Shridhar. True, Govindan Naïr is not here, but Tangamma and Modhu have not gone to Alwaye. What is there to do in Alwaye, when there is Trivandrum. (As the university, after all, is here. Modhu should go there next year.) One can hear the sea at night and sleep in the open. Usha says Trivandrum is like a place you walk about in your sleep. You see everything and you have seen only sleep in sleep. Does one see sleep, Usha? I ask. She says: Seeing is sleep.

Suddenly I hear the music of marriage. I must go.

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## GEORGE ECONOMOU

George Economou studies at Columbia University and teaches at Wagner College.

### DAPHNE

Daphne when your dainty toes spread and sank  
into the welcome earth along the banks  
nourished by your father's singing river  
did you hear the half-said passion  
whispered in your ear before your lover  
stopped, not caring if you'd be lost or won  
in his bid for flesh, to stare at the grace  
and music of your metamorphosis?

How could she hear, her ears all stuffed with leaves?  
His hand quick as rain  
touched a shoulder not for his fingers' use  
and he can never wash his hands again.  
But she will stand through all the seasons' rush  
willing to sing any song of the flesh  
she could not have sung without this change  
from fragile virgin flesh to the estranged  
permanence and form of a poem or tree.

## CHELSEA REVIEW

Jack Hirschman, whose verse has appeared in *Prairie Schooner* and *Botteghe Oscure*, teaches at Indiana University, where he conducts BABEL, readings of contemporary writing.

### Jack Hirschman from the PTOLEMAIC STATUES OF THE SERAPIUM OF MEMPHIS

*For Leon Golub*

Pindar's body is most of all whole  
Throned among these poets and philosophers:  
Though his face is pounded flat by time,  
His scepter Olympian muscles of a lyre  
Strumming a song aimed at the parallel dromes  
Aimed at the horizon's breast-splitting cord,  
Pindar's body is most of all whole,

Otherwise rubble:

Heraclites,  
A bony thonged leg.  
PROTAG stumped  
Like the very letters of his name.  
The waisted torso of Orpheus  
With chipped intimations of wings  
Dead about his feet,

While a few scattered and decapitate  
Sphinx from the Avenue of the Sphinx  
And the holy Serapium  
Have their bodies turned to them,  
Enigmatically.

And above all  
Players in this play  
In this sun-eaten pit and basin  
In this amphitheater of sand  
Where I am here today  
Come down in flesh and bone  
A mid-twentieth century

Son of a melody sounding  
And resounding void of theme,  
Come down to find the meaning  
After many bedouin driftings,  
The Father and the Truth  
To attach these senses to,

Above all

Players in this play  
Plato only holds the key  
To the stage behind the stage,  
Of whose statuary body  
Only hieroglyphs remain,  
A dwarfed and hooded mystery  
Where the head begins at waist:  
Nothing but a fist but the fist  
That, burning to be  
The very fistless essence of,  
Absent of all mortality, ...

I turn

To the sculpturing wind  
That the sculpturing wind  
Turn me to stone  
And then erode until addenda  
And appendages be gone,  
And being but a rubble in the midst  
Closer to what timeless being is,  
I shall be a knuckle of that fist  
Closed round the key

That a few scattered and decapitated  
Sphinx from the Avenue of the Sphinx  
And the holy Serapium  
Are turning their bodies to,  
Enigmatically.

## from THE BESTIARY

We have forgotten what enchantment is. Each step  
Is a descent indecently descendant of a shame,  
Shedding what perversities we cannot name  
As one continually sheds a weddingdress  
Descending to a newer nakedness  
That only new perversity can claim.

Remember, once, going up these stairs  
Once before going up and finding doors  
That were opening upon  
Whole albums of warm and human breath,  
And the tomboy titillations on the bannisters,  
Sliding down to the barking, carpetted floor  
And standing upright and parting your hair  
The better to see the firelight upstairs  
Arranging itself in a troop of golden falcons  
To wing you back up for more.

Now jealous parakeets cawk me out of the rooms  
Where I have left a little of my night  
In rabid signature upon a body's white  
Neck and bosom, and in mascara tins,  
And I fix behind me my vestigal bones  
That all my sisters seeing me here,

Each step taken lonelier  
Than the step to be taken were,  
That all should cry Beware, Beware  
Her flashing eyes, her floating hair  
Weave a circle round her thrice,  
And gathering in a queenly train  
Behind me, of amphibians,  
How in the name of Light should I  
Tear my body from their cries,  
When we are altogether damned upright  
As we are all together stitched and bound  
To go down to the basest step of the night  
Gazing at the naked beastface of our wound  
A paw away and froze in a muzzle of ice.

These are three pieces from a cycle of poems on the death of Achilles, based on the mediaeval Troy legend.

## PRIAM: LAST FABULATION

I, who am old, with a cold heart  
shall not measure my manhood  
against such a drove of wearied men,  
who moulder now in death's puberty.  
Skin loses life, hair  
rots out, breast bone cracks  
and yard lies down in springless cold.

Meditate, at least, I can on the mere  
bodies of this death: they still keep  
a horrible likeness to the body of man.  
Proportion passes last. Until then,  
head hold shoulder, in despair  
at the weight of the livelong paradox.

In their death, all motion of mortality  
passes too, and their corruption  
becomes, let us say, organic; no dung,  
urine, sweat can suppress the growth  
of earth and energy in the fatted grave.

I have survived, and wither still.  
The fat of my shoulders sweats and stinks  
and proves I am alive. Dull life,  
caress me with the comfort of your sloth,  
shun every haste. I am the king,  
the magical flesh of man's justice.  
Let me so describe myself. The last  
communion with my abstraction grants me this,  
the privilege of summing myself up, so that all time  
will speak of Priam feeding on his sons,  
his subjects and his brain.

I have become

my city, and now we both dissolve  
in something infinitely less than death.  
I have no name for it. Survival  
is too strong, yet I survive. We,  
mad justice and a mummied city,  
change from verbs to nouns. Night  
hurries down with its irrelevant dark.

## ABOUT HECTOR

This is the truth of Hector,  
horse harrier, master of the spur,  
brown-headed burr in the flank  
of bay, roan or Seythian white:  
"I carved wheat to my image,  
ground it long in my stomach's mill,  
made it the shape of my mastery  
and saddled those white horses with my will."

Reach under the curved full thundering belly of that beast  
and find the cinch unknotted, since the horseman's firm.  
No saddle's crupper's needed on that mount,  
"the arched tension of my knees halts indulgence." Hector,

think what indifferent carrion crows must see,  
peering down at your brown head bobbing beneath,  
horse and rider, forced for appearance to be  
a monstrous willing animal, far  
less than human. And yet: "I,  
horse-taming Hector, confident  
in the organic product of my will,  
scorn the crows that peek my wheat."

## ODYSSEUS' SONG

My lyre-greedy knucklebones assay  
base ore of my cunning or resolve  
to force a meeker alloy from the clay-  
clustered crystals that I solve.

Spurious metal begins the hoax :  
bronze as peacock I can cook my heart  
and fetch no musical sound to grace  
the crystallization of my art.

Hammer home the plectrum and the fret,  
refine the ingot and the ingot's form  
until the malleable matter's set ;  
the song is brittle while the bronze is warm.

Each beaten bar of copper I can coax  
to the semblance of a travel-weary face  
where all old shapes of love and beauty lurk  
under the silence of the unfinished work.  
*The song is brittle but the bronze is warm.*

## CAFFE CINO

31 Cornelia Street (off 4th St., at 6th Ave)

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\*This notice would have been in smaller print, but that is

OUT



Mr. Rothenberg's translations of contemporary German poets will soon be published by the City Lights Press.

## Jerome Rothenberg

### A POEM FOR MARKING THE DESCENT

We get what we pay for. My prize was a night  
in the park, on a bench that had started to move.  
A bench with grey veins, with the skin of a fish,  
with a heart alive under slats: a bench  
that carries its victims down to the lake.  
In the city behind me the bulbs of despair  
came to life. Images raced through the air  
on a journey toward beckoning video screens.  
Lovers, potent on pills, performed  
in a frenzy. The snake at the foot of your bed  
slithered up. And the moon pushed tides through  
the sewers.

We get what we lose in the dark: what we fear  
when the moon holds an icicle over our heads,  
when the landscape is trembling with knives. We get  
what we liked. We ride on a bench trailing blood.  
A clue for the captain to work on. A beast  
for the movies to film, that carries us down  
to the lake. The scraping of bones over glass.  
We get what we are . . .

Five poems by Hugh Smith appeared in the first issue of the Chelsea Review. These are the first two poems in a series in which the poet uses the persona Stein.

## FIRST STEIN POEM

The image I wind waking and set to walk  
the clock day with unequals, I call Stein

that own soulease, blind to his good  
I have let go through dark and thin to find

in the set and urge of every path and voice  
his one way, and all the edge of choice.

I know him walking where the light is blind  
over rill and rock, barren and full wood,

take his sights and music down for mine:  
his is the wound voice I hear when I talk.

Nothing to save, nothing to change or damn;  
where he has left me now is where I am.

## SECOND STEIN POEM

Stein in the cold freezes to fact and stone,  
sits at a winter table, sun over his shoulder,  
studying metres, while winter cypress  
stirs in the search of wind

around his vacant labor's long shrug  
go without saying

seeing those children  
climb the cold hill and the ever green  
slant from earth's center over the slope they climb

Stein's hand counts to death, taming his time  
his place and fitting here into the scene

an instant mirrors as the three boys pause  
at the crest, and run

down out of sight  
and sudden in his mind Stein drops the sun.

## NOTICE

After this issue, Robert Kelly, George Economou, and Joan Kelly will withdraw from the *Chelsea Review* to begin a new poetry magazine entitled *Trobar*. Current subscribers will receive both the *New Chelsea* and *Trobar* for the period of their subscription.

# **FUTURE ISSUES WILL FEATURE:**

## **NEW CHELSEA**

THE ASYLUM, a long, long short story by Pierre Gascar.

ANACLETO MORONES, a story by Juan Rulfo.

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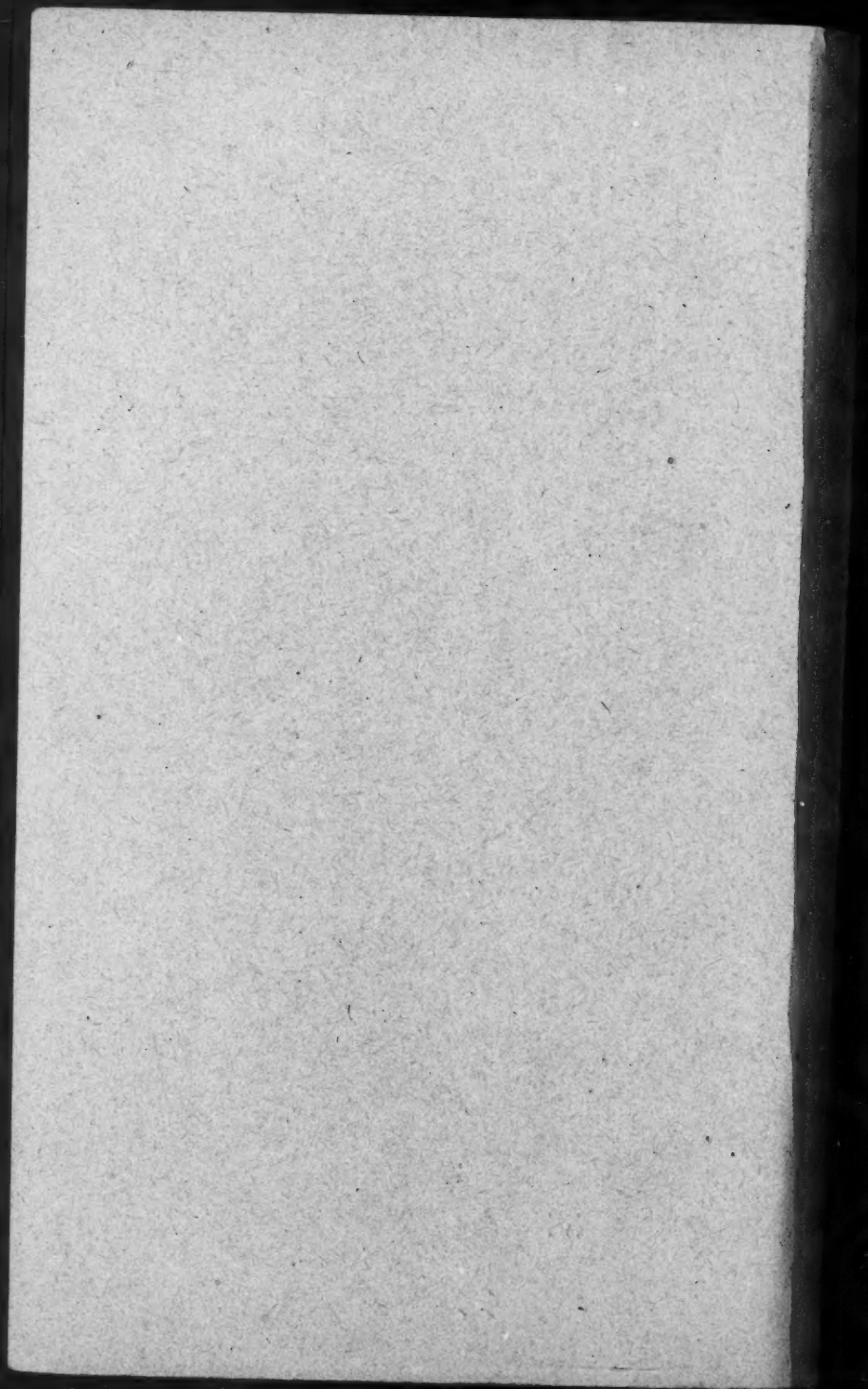
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